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Special Thanks

Special thanks to my old friend QueeenForestOfStraya for helping me to bring *Dark Clouds* to life, and for allowing me to use her characters Mouseleap, Jay, Cloudstar, and Mintfur in my stories.

Allegiances

WindClan

Leader - Goldenstar (Tunneler), magnificent silver-tongued yellow tom. Green eyes. Usurper of Cloudstar.

Deputy - Tigerstorm (Tunneler), dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat - Mintfur, grey tom with blue eyes.

Warriors - Stormshade (Tunneler), handsome grey tabby tom with white paws, chest & belly. Blue eyes.
↳ Hailpaw, grey-and-white tom with blue eyes. Formerly a rogue.

Brambleblaze (Tunneler), brown tom with black stripes. Green eyes.
↳Woolpaw, white she-cat with a soft pelt. One blue eye and one green eye.

Swiftleap (Tunneler), ginger-brown tom with brown ears, a brown tail, one green eye, and one blue eye.

Rabbitspark (Moor Runner), grey tom with white paws. Blue eyes.

Claytail (Moor Runner), grey tom with amber eyes.

Foxrunner (Moor Runner), dark ginger she-cat with amber eyes.

Oceanbreeze (Moor Runner), blue-grey she-cat with blue eyes.

Beestream (Moor Runner), yellow-and-black she-cat with green eyes.

Leopardheart (Moor Runner), yellow she-cat with green eyes.

Galetrot (Moor Runner), grey tabby tom with pale blue eyes and a broken leg.

Shaleflame (Tunneler), grey tom with odd triangular black stripes, giving his pelt the appearance of shale. Blue eyes.

Barkfur (Moor Runner), brown tom with amber eyes.

Winnowfall (Moor Runner), light brown she-cat with faint stripes on her legs. Amber eyes.

Sunclaw (Tunneler), grey tom with yellow eyes.

Mouseleap (Moor Runner), brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Riversong (Moor Runner), grey tabby she-cat with long fur and blue eyes.

Thornface (Moor Runner), light grey tom with brown splotches around his neck and scars on his cheeks. Blue eyes.

Nightbreeze (Moor Runner), black tom with blue eyes. Formerly a ThunderClan warrior.

Littlewing (Moor Runner), white and brown she-cat with amber eyes.

Queens - Rushwind (Moor Runner), black she-cat with grey eyes. Mother to Thornface's kits: Wolfkit, grey tom with blue eyes; Ravenkit, black she-kit with blue eyes; and Ryekit, a dark grey she-kit with grey eyes.

Elders - Cloudstar (Moor Runner), blind brown-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes. Former Leader of WindClan.

RiverClan

Leader - Troutstar, elderly grey tabby tom with amber eyes.

Deputy - Timberclaw, brown tom with a torn ear. Green eyes.

Medicine Cat - Lightwish, cream-coloured she-cat with blue eyes.

Warriors - Oceaneyes, sleek grey tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Shalepelt, black tom with yellow eyes.

Lakefrost, grey tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Pebblepool, cream-coloured she-cat with amber eyes.

Rockfall, black-and-gray tom with green eyes.

ThunderClan

Leader - Brackenstar, pale golden tom with green eyes.

Deputy - Dapplefur, young brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes.
↳Darkpaw, grey tom with black splotches and yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat - Leafstorm, calico she-cat with grey eyes.
↳Mistypaw, light grey she-cat with white stripes and blue eyes

Warriors - Cinderdusk, long-furred grey she-cat with black spots and unusual blue eyes.

Breezeheart, mottled, short-furred light grey tom with emerald green eyes.
↳Breezepaw, mottled, short-furred grey tom with green eyes.

Appledrop, maple-furred tom with red spots, hazel eyes, and tufted ears.

Flashfur, short-furred golden tabby tom with bright blue eyes.
↳Cherrypaw, black she-cat with green eyes

Lightningfall, yellow tom with green eyes.

Firefur, flame-coloured tom with sparkling green eyes.

Boulderrush, grey tom with blue eyes.

Embercloud, long-furred ginger-and-white she-cat with green eyes.

ShadowClan

Leader - Thornstar, big light brown tom with amber eyes.

Deputy - Nightshade, pitch-black tom with yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat - Specklefur, brown she-cat with black spots and yellow eyes.

Warriors - Stonefang, grey tom with green eyes.

SkyClan

Leader - Sparrowstar, brown-and-white tom with amber eyes.

Deputy - Fallowstep, black tom with one brown leg and green eyes.

Medicine Cat - Stonefeather, grey tom with blue eyes.

I

Now

Stormshade purred as he sank into his nest. It had been a long day, and a tinge of satisfaction wormed its way into his stomach as he rolled onto his back, watching the stars overhead.

"Goodnight," came a hushed whisper. A brown tom slunk past him, ears flicking. "Try not to snore this time."

Stormshade chuckled. "Only if you don't kick me again," he murmured. Curling up, he added, "Sleep well, Swiftleap."

With that, he closed his eyes, allowing darkness to embrace him.

Slowly, like a calming storm, the darkness receded, revealing a perfect, rolling field. Rabbits loped through the grass ahead, darting into a collection of lush ferns. The sun shone, but instead of blistering heat Stormshade felt a cool, soft breeze ruffling his fur.

"Welcome." An unfamiliar voice caught the WindClan warrior off guard. A grey tom was peering at him from ahead, his eyes bright. Stars danced around his paws.

Stormshade flinched, his breath hitching. "You scared me!" Licking his chest self-consciously, he added, "Who *are* you?"

"Your ancestor." The grey tom dipped his head, ears flicking.

I'm in StarClan? Stormshade fell onto his haunches, paws tingling. "...Am I dead?"

"Fortunately not," the ancestor mewed wryly. "We wanted to tell you something."

Stormshade paused to lick his shoulder fur, burning with embarrassment. *He must be disappointed.* "What is it?"

An amused grin seemed to tug at the StarClan warrior's lips, though after a moment he restrained it with visible difficulty. "I have a warning for you." Padding to Stormshade's side, he gently steered him towards a shining pond.

"It's not good news." The StarClan warrior extended a paw, flicking a piece of debris from Stormshade's chest. It landed in the pond, causing the perfectly smooth water to ripple gently. "WindClan will face many challenges in the future," he explained. "Everyone will."

Stormshade's heart sank. "What should I do?"

"Gather what remains," the Ancestor instructed, "And turn the embers into a raging fire. But first..." he broke off, leaning towards his descendant. Stormshade felt his soft breath billow into his ear. "Good intentions shall lead the noblest among you into darkness."

Stormshade blinked, stumbling away from him. "What do you *mean*?"

The Ancestor shrugged, dipping his head reverently. His frame began to grow transparent, and he merely dipped his head. "Make us proud."

* * *

"Two fighting styles?" Hailpaw's mew was incredulous. "That's ridiculous!"

Stormshade was broken from his thoughts at his apprentice's words. Suppressing a sigh, he strolled around his apprentice confidently. "Hailpaw, we're tunnellers." Gesturing at the young tom's broad shoulders, he mewed, "Moor-runners are usually smaller than us, so they're trained to compensate for their smaller size."

"How?" Hailpaw tilted his head quizzically.

"They use our weight and momentum to their advantage," Stormshade replied matter-of-factly. "They like to do hit-and-run attacks, so it's very difficult to get a hit in. That's why, even though you're a tunneler, you still need to be quick on your paws."

Hailpaw scuffed the ground in front of him with a forepaw. "I guess."

"So," Stormshade meowed, "In other words, runners are both annoying in battle and in peacetime."

"I heard that!" A yellow-and-black tabby she-cat emerged into the clearing, roughly cuffing Stormshade over the ear.

"Ow!" Stormshade flinched. "It's a term of endearment, Beestream!"

"Yeah!" Hailpaw chimed in. "Stormshade calls Brambleblaze annoying all the time."

Stormshade stared at his apprentice pointedly. "No, that's different -- Brambleblaze *is* annoying." He then shifted his gaze back to Beestream, shifting on his paws. "You know," He murmured, "When I'm done with Hailpaw here, you and I can go hunting. Eh?" He wasn't so sure about these plans. His dream worried him, but at the same time, he didn't want to seem like he had bees in his brain.

She chuckled, shoulders rolling, and shoved him away. "You know I can't, Stormshade."

"Aw, why not?"

"What about Mouseleap?" Beestream murmured, more quietly.

"What about her?" Stormshade instantly felt a pang of regret for his words. Quickly, he added, "That all was a long time ago. I'm ready to leave it."

She stared at him disbelievingly. "Sure you are."

Hailpaw raised a brow. Stormshade peered at him and mewed, "I suppose I have stuff to do."

"I'll watch," Beestream offered, drawing a paw over her ear. Stormshade felt his pelt bush slightly, red under his grey fur.

"You wanna watch?" He asked haughtily, feigning confidence. Hailpaw prodded him.

"S'what I said," Beestream replied, ears pinned back teasingly. "Surely the great tunneler Stormshade won't mind an audience."

Stormshade gulped, shifting away from her to hide his nervousness. What if he did something wrong? *I never do,* he reminded himself, keeping his fur flat and his eyes almost naturally cool.

"Alright -- I'm teaching Hailpaw to fight moor-runners."

"Like me?" Bestream asked wryly.

"Yeah, but not nearly as pretty."

"Shut up."

Stormshade ignored her, crouching before Hailpaw. "Alright, Hailpaw. It's simple."

"I'm all ears!" Hailpaw mewed excitedly.

"I'm going to dart around you as quickly as possible, and you need to try and hit me."

Hailpaw nodded, but then his face scrunched up. "But you're a tunneler. That means you're a *big* target, and clumsy, and--"

Stormshade winced. "That's enough, Hailpaw."

"Sorry," Hailpaw shrunk away.

"I can do it!" Beestream offered, trotting over. "If Hailpaw's up to it, of course." She purred at the young grey tom, who hopped around her excitedly.

Stormshade nodded, secretly relieved, and he watched as they wove around each other. Stormshade's callow apprentice charged again and again, only to be toppled by the quick she-warrior.

Stormshade watched, partly ashamed at training his apprentice so poorly, and yet amused by his enthusiasm. It reminded him of happier times, when he was an apprentice. It reminded him of being mentored by Sunclaw. Was he as good of an apprentice? No --

Stormshade never could please his former mentor. And then he blinked.

"Beestream?"

Beestream looked up from where she was pinning a giggling Hailpaw. "Yeah?"

"Can you train Hailpaw for me? I need to talk to Cloudstar."

Then

Stormpaw felt blood seep from the rabbit's pelt as he passed the she-cat's apprentice den. Cloudstar had separated them when her only surviving daughter became an apprentice.

"Hiya," a brown tabby tom strolled in front of him, eyes narrowed. "Listen, Stormpaw."

"Bramblepaw, let me through!"

"Nah." Bramblepaw thrusted his face into Stormpaw's, mewing, "You see, Thornface wants me to catch a rabbit on my own. I was thinking I could take this--" he snatched the rabbit from Stormpaw's jaws, mew muffled by the new bundle of fur in his grasp, "And pass it off as my own."

"Hey!" Stormpaw hissed, swiping at Bramblepaw, who ducked away with a chuckle.

"Whoah!" He cried, raising his voice. He stared at Sunclaw out of the corner of his eyes. "Stop taking credit for my work, Stormpaw!"

Stormpaw's ears flattened. "Wait! Stop!" He hissed. "Take it! Just don't bring my mentor into this, alright?"

Bramblepaw purred. "You're the best denmate, Stormpaw." Condescendingly patting Stormpaw's head, he turned on his four heels and padded towards the elder's den.

Oh, how I hate him. Stormpaw suppressed a growl of frustration and started towards the female apprentice's den. *Now I can't eat with her.*

Looking both ways, he warily stepped inside, pausing to swiftly groom his fur.

A brown tabby she-cat was waiting inside, staring at him with wary amber eyes.

"Mousepaw," Stormpaw mewed. "What's up?" He padded up to her, pressing his nose against her cheek, but she ducked away.

Mousepaw shuddered. "Stormpaw..." she murmured longingly, "Cloudstar won't like this."

"I don't care what Cloudstar wants," Stormpaw mewed softly. "I care about *you*."

Mousepaw let out a pathetic mewl of sadness, before adding, "It just isn't meant to be. My mother... she just wants the best, don't you know?"

Stormpaw opened his jaws to give his reply, but a grey warrior burst into the den. "Stormpaw," he snarled. "I should've known you were in here. Chatting up she-cats again?" He snorted, padding in between the two apprentices. Mousepaw looked away, and Stormpaw shrank beneath his fur.

"Bramblepaw told me you'd be in here," Sunclaw continued rather gruffly. "Where is your rabbit? You told me you'd bring a rabbit!"

Stormpaw gazed at his paws, pelt hot, before murmuring. "Sorry."

"'Sorry' catches no rabbits. And neither do you, apparently. Why do I get stuck with the most arrogant and incompetent apprentice?" Sunclaw cuffed Stormpaw over the ear, before pulling him out of the den.

Now

"Shouldn't you take this to Cloudstar?" Goldentooth padded alongside Stormshade, clicking his tongue thoughtfully. "Or Mintfur?"

Stormshade stared at the deputy imploringly. "Mintfur will be a

little awkward. And Cloudstar--"

Goldentooth chuckled. "I suppose she never did like you, did she, my friend?" Then his tone softened, and with a smooth, perfect sigh, he added, "I know that the cats of WindClan aren't entirely confident in her sanity anymore, especially with that tunnel plan of hers."

Stormshade recalled that mission, and he could suddenly feel clay and mud pressing tightly against his skin. With a choke, he gasped, "I don't want to talk about that."

"I understand. It was horrifying for everyone. But I promise you, I will undergo *every effort* to ensure your safety. Whatever grievances you have, I will bring them up."

Stormshade's shoulders loosened. "We're lucky to have a leader like you, Goldentooth."

"I'm not your leader."

"You *are* our leader, in all but name."

Goldentooth shrugged, settling underneath the shade of a fern near the edge of camp. "Maybe so, but..." he patted the ground next to him, gesturing for Stormshade to sit alongside him. "When I became deputy, I resolved to lift my cats up. Make no mistake, I am your servant, and *you* are in charge. Tell me about this--"

"Dream." Stormshade tucked his paws underneath him. "It was a dream."

"And what was in it, friend?" Goldentooth licked his shoulder, before freezing. "StarClan, how rude of me! Would you like me to fetch you something to eat?"

Stormshade didn't feel all that hungry--not one bit. "No, I'm good." With a gulp and a shutter, he murmured, "I dreamt of one of my ancestors last night." He closed his eyes, struggling to focus.

The Deputy of WindClan extended his golden tail and stroked Stormshade's back. "Try to remember, brother."

"I am." Stormshade took a deep breath. "He told me that WindClan is in danger. And he said something like..." He paused, eyes shining thoughtfully, before mewing, "'Good intentions will lead the noblest among you into darkness.'"

Goldentooth was silent for a few moments. Suddenly, briskly, he mewed, "Come." Without another word, he disappeared into the leader's den.

Then

Stormshade's eyes reflected the moonlight as he traveled across the moor. There was a sense of anxiety in the air.

Cloudstar had called every tunneler in the Clan to a private meeting in the most remote corner of the moor, and when the scents of his Clanmates flooded into his nostrils, Stormshade knew he had arrived.

Cloudstar and Goldentooth sat together at the head of the group, and Sunclaw, Swiftleap, Brambleblaze, and Shaleflame huddled around them.

Stormshade wedged himself into the huddle, and Shaleflame stepped aside to grant him room.

"ThunderClan's treachery has gone on for too long!" Cloudstar proclaimed, her black-and-white fur rippling along her spine.

"Our leader has a special assignment," Goldentooth meowed, dipping his head.

Cloudstar unsheathed a single claw, drawing a big, smooth, vertical arc in the ground.

"Imagine that this is the lakeshore." Then, she drew two straight horizontal lines. "And in between these two lines is ThunderClan's territory."

Swiftleap tilted his head, interested, while Stormshade hunched his back, leaning in to see the drawing.

"The Three Ancient Tribes made tunnels," Cloudstar's voice almost held a purr in it. "Tunnels which *should* run right along the lakeshore."

Shaleflame and Stormshade exchanged glances.

"Cause those tunnels to collapse," Cloudstar murmured, "And we can artificially flood ThunderClan's territory."

For a moment, the assembled tunnelers paused to confer, and surprised murmurs and curious mews filled the air, until Shaleflame spoke up.

"Why?"

"Yeah." Stormshade blinked. "That'd do nothing but harm."

Cloudstar scowled. "ThunderClan is poisoning our prey," she snapped. "Pure and simple. We need to retaliate -- and that means flooding their territory. If we can't eat, neither shall they."

We have no proof of that, Stormshade thought.

Brambleblaze scoffed. "That's the dumbest idea I've---"

Cloudstar glared at him, and suddenly Brambleblaze grew quiet.

Stormshade couldn't help but agree with him.

Now

It was stuffy inside the leader's den, and the floors were strewn with half-eaten corpses. An increasingly skinny Cloudstar was sitting in her nest, and a brown she-cat groomed her fur. Her eyes narrowed as she turned to look at Stormshade.

"I thought I made it *very* clear that I don't want you in here."

Stormshade dipped his head. He could feel the brown she-cat's gaze on his pelt, and, as he always did, allowed his muscles to flex slightly, making him appear more muscular. "Very clear, my leader."

"I hope you have come here for a good reason." She snorted, and added, "If you want to come into my den, the least you could do is try to look good." A hiss in her throat, she snapped, "Mouseleap, clean him up!"

"Yes, mother," the tabby she-cat choked out.

"No!" Stormshade recoiled, and instantly felt bad. Narrowing his eyes cooly, he continued, "That will be alright." He could feel Mouseleap's gaze sweep over him, and suddenly his muscles bunched, as if he was preparing to pounce on unwitting prey. Clearing his throat, he added, "There are much more important matters at paw."

Goldentooth stepped back, as if he was giving Stormshade room.

"Yes, a prophecy." Cloudstar snorted. "How convenient for *you* to have been chosen by StarClan. What did they say?"

"'Good intentions will lead the noblest among you into darkness.'" As Stormshade spoke, he could feel a pair of icy eyes inspecting him. Cloudstar growled, her voice as sharp as flint.

"Somehow, that comes as no surprise." She then pulled an expression that was almost motherly, turning to her daughter. Mouseleap's forlorn face seemed to fall even more. "Good intentions often tend to.... defile us. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Of course, mother." There was no conviction in Mouseleap's broken voice.

"But it's the noblest among us," Stormshade pointed out.

Cloudstar followed his gaze. "Anything else of importance?"

Stormshade paused. "I mean..." *I don't want her to think I'm arrogant.* "...He said that WindClan will undergo an unprecedented collapse, and that I was to rebuild it."

Cloudstar stared at him. Her whiskers twitched, and suddenly she began to laugh. "Of course! Of course *you* would place yourself in such an important position!" With a shudder of what must've been

anger, she snarled, "This is a trick. It's all been a trick!" Her lips peeled back into a hideous grimace. "You think I don't know what you want to do to my daughter?!" She rounded on Mouseleap, claws unsheathed. "You're in on it too, aren't you, Mouseleap?"

Stormshade leapt to his paws, diving in between mother and daughter. His eyes were narrowed. Cloudstar shook with uncontrolled rage. "Don't you dare hurt her!" He snapped.

"I wish you'd died in those tunnels," Cloudstar's venemous voice pooled into Stormshade's ears. "I'd expect an incompetent tunneler like yourself to have been buried alive."

Stormshade felt his skin run cold, and he became increasingly aware of Mouseleap's presense behind him. Through gritted teeth, he growled, "Excuse me?"

"Someone's poisoning our prey." Cloudstar's ears flattened, and suddenly she turned on her heels to peer out the den's entrance. "This whole time, I thought it was ThunderClan. Perhaps I was wrong."

"Goldentooth!" A grey tabby tom hobbled up to the entrance, eyes wide. "Goldentooth, I--"

Cloudstar narrowed her eyes. "Yes, Galetrot?" Her tail flicked impatiently.

"Uh--" Galetrot's wide eyes seemed to grow even more, and he choked out, "I guess you work too."

"You *guess*?"

"It's urgent!" Clearly looking to avoid the Clan Leader's wrath, Galetrot blurted, "It's ThunderClan! I think Brackenstar brought every warrior he had, and they're coming right to camp!"

Cloudstar's eyes became slits, and her body seemed to spasm. With a howl, she roared, "I had plans!"

Goldentooth was at her side in an instant, and without a protest, Cloudstar withdrew. "This is fine, Galetrot. We have the defensive

advantage, and tunnelers. Stormshade, Mouseleap, follow me."

Mouseleap eagerly trotted forward, ducking away from Cloudstar's attempt to restrain her. The leader suddenly seemed old and weak.

Stormshade wriggled out of the leader's den, pausing at Galetrot's side. The young warrior's eyes shone. Without hesitation, he offered, "I'll lead a patrol, Goldentooth! I'll show these tree lurkers what WindClan's made of!"

"I appreciate it, brother, but we must make a plan." Goldentooth scrambled to the tallrock, and immediately every cat in camp froze, anticipating his speech. "Brothers and sisters, we are yet again faced with a grave threat, but no amount of blood shed is too much for our beloved Clan!" Clearing his throat, he proclaimed, "Have no fear! Any pain you endure will be temporary. Every warrior who lives shall become a hero! Every warrior who dies shall be with StarClan!"

His proclamation was met with a cheer from the warriors gathered around him, and Goldentooth wasted no time in continuing. "I will attempt to negotiate with them."

"And if they refuse?" Sunclaw sounded dubious.

"Stormshade will lead the tunnelers. Gather beneath them and attack the moment you hear the fighting begin." He pointed his tail at a russet she-cat. "Foxrunner, retrieve every hunting patrol and make a diversionary strike from the direction of the lake--but *only* if it looks like we're fighting. The rest of you, with me!" With that, Goldentooth leapt from the tallrock, charging out of camp with Galetrot, Winnowfall, Leopardheart, Tigerstorm, Claytail, Oceanbreeze, and Nightbreeze on his tail.

Stormshade raised his own tail, rallying the tunnelers, before leading them out of camp.

Swiftleap trotted to his side with a frustrated snort. "If only Cloudstar hadn't put us all in camp, we would've heard them coming by now."

"Yeah!" Brambleblaze seemed all too cheery. "ThunderClan cats are a bunch of heavy-pawed rabbit-brains. Their pawsteps are noisier than sheep." After a moment passed, he added, "I guess it's alright, though. Stormshade would've been too stupid to notice anything."

"Would you just shut up for once in your life?" Stormshade hissed, peering over his shoulder as he peeled into a tunnel.

"How'd Goldentooth settle on a daft furball like you to lead the charge, anyway?"

"Brambleblaze, shut it!" Swiftleap bared his teeth, though it was hardly visible in the darkness of the tunnel.

"Do you want me to take charge, apprentice?" Sunclaw's smug voice could be heard.

Stormshade suppressed a growl. "Shut up, everyone! I need to focus!" He closed his eyes, although he continued to trot ahead with little change in pace. He could hear Goldentooth's patrol overhead suddenly come to a halt. "Everyone hold up!" he snapped. "Quiet!"

"ThunderClan must be right outside camp!" Brambleblaze breathed.

A grey tom squeezed beside Stormshade. "Winnowfall's all alone up there," he hissed.

"Keep your fur on," Stormshade soothed. "Winnowfall'll be fine."

"If they lay a claw on her pelt, I'll kill every one of them."

"Easy, tiger!" Brambleblaze cracked.

Heavy pawsteps could be heard on the surface. "It's great to see that you left camp to speak with us," Brackenstar, ThunderClan's leader, growled. "Goldentooth, I have known you a long time, which is why I'm surprised that you'd follow through on such a stupid plan." There was a moment of silence. "As unstable as Cloudstar is." The chuckles and laughs of the ThunderClan warriors could be heard as clear as clean water, and Sunclaw growled. "What I'm *not* surprised by is that Cloudstar sent you out here to do the talking for her. Poor Goldentooth, right?" More pawsteps could be heard, and

Stormshade knew that he was probably looking at his warriors. "Always doing the heavy lifting! StarClan, are you a warrior, or a puppet?"

"I am loyal to my leader," Goldentooth replied smoothly. "Whatever grievances you have with us, purported or not, we can settle with words. Otherwise--" there was a pause, "--There will be a lot of blood on your paws."

"Purported?" Brackenstar scoffed. "You and I both know what happened. ThunderClan has flooded thanks to your tunnel stunt. An apprentice nearly died."

Stormshade stiffened. *Cloudstar's plan worked?* Brambleblaze shivered. "The old coot did something right for once!"

"WindClan abandoned the tunnels when we left the forest," Goldentooth meowed, before his voice suddenly loosened. "My friends, we follow the same code! We descend from the same tribe! We're *kin*! Is it not the goal of every leader to bring about a period of peace and stability? To prevent these brotherly conflicts? Need I remind you of our ancient alliance?"

"Your Clan never held up their side of that alliance, Goldentooth. I will not stand here speaking to a mere deputy. Take me to Cloudstar."

"What if I refuse, for the safety of my ailing leader?"

"We will force our way inside."

Swiftleap brushed past Stormshade, growling in the darkness. "Let's get up there."

"They haven't started fighting yet," Stormshade snapped. "Stay where you are."

Stormshade heard Goldentooth sigh. "You'll *force* your way inside?" His light pawsteps could be heard until he was standing directly in front of Brackenstar. "You didn't earn your leader name," he growled. "When I look into your face, I see no leader. I see a tyrant. Your own warriors have tended to leave your Clan."

"Nightbreeze was a traitor!"

"Case in point. He never saw you as a leader -- just a bloodthirsty monster." He raised his voice. "What about the rest of your warriors? Do they fear you, or love you?"

He took another step towards his ThunderClan counterpart.

"Your cats follow you because they have no choice. Mine follow me because they feel an obligation. We both control a Clan, but make no mistake: We are different. I have something that you can never fathom. I have a family -- You have servants."

"I hate you." Brackenstar snarled. "You lie through your teeth. You talk your way out of every conflict. You're spineless, and you will never fight for your so-called family."

"Are you sure about that?" The sound of pawsteps overhead could be heard once again as Goldentooth's patrol fanned out behind him. "Because when we're done here, Brackenstar, there'll be a lot of ThunderClan blood on this moor. I'd hate to give Leafstorm all that trouble."

"I will not ask again."

"Good. In fact, Brackenstar --" Goldentooth paused. "I like it better this way."

Without having to even give an order, Goldentooth's patrol leaped into action. Stormshade flinched at the sound of the chaos above them.

"Right!" he yowled. "Pair up and attack on sight! No mercy!"

Swiftleap pressed against Stormshade. "I'm with you!" As one, the pair of toms shot through the winding tunnels as dirt and mud showered down on them.

Right as they came to an exit, a ginger tom's leg punched through the hole. Stormshade yanked Swiftleap back. Oh, how tempting that leg was. Stormshade couldn't attack it -- otherwise WindClan's use of the tunnels would be known.

With a growl, the ginger tom yanked his leg free, and Stormshade could hear him be promptly tackled by a moor runner.

The two tunnelers briefly glanced at one another. Stormshade winked, and Swiftleap scoffed and raced ahead.

The toms burst from the tunnel. Stormshade bowled over a screeching black tom before he could comprehend his sudden appearance.

Stormshade bit into the sleek tom's shoulder, wrestling him to the ground.

"Where'd you come from?" the tom snarled, wriggling free. He struck at Stormshade with his hind paws, before whipping around and tackling his opponent as he stumbled back.

Stormshade felt the moor floor strike his back as he fell. The black tom, a young warrior, seemed giddy at the idea of winning his first fight.

The muscles in Stormshade's shoulders rippled as he gripped the tom's flanks and sliced his claws downwards, leaving red trails along the ThunderClanner's ribs. As the tom screeched in sudden pain, Stormshade slammed his forepaws into his chest with as much force as he could muster, sending him tumbling away.

Stormshade leapt to his paws, just in time to see Foxrunner leading the reinforcements into the fray. He couldn't watch for long, though. His ThunderClan enemy was back on the offensive, aiming a blow at Stormshade's face.

Stormshade ducked away, countering with a strike to the tom's shoulder before sweeping his forelegs out from under him. With a grunt, he leapt forward and slammed his paws down onto the tom's bleeding ribs, causing him to yowl in pain. He hastily climbed to his paws and fled.

Stormshade paused for a moment to catch his breath. A white tom streaked past him, Stormshade lunged at him as he passed, slipping in the mud.

Claytail growled as he skirted Stormshade, chasing the ThunderClan warrior. "Watch where you're going!"

Goldentooth was visible again. "Back to camp!" He yowled.

Swiftleap was at Stormshade's side again, sporting a bent tail and a bitten paw. He flinched as Brambleblaze tumbled by, wrestling with a ThunderClan tom at least twice his size, and lifted Stormshade up by the scruff. "You're losing your edge, Stormshade!" He glared at Goldentooth. "StarClan, is he abandoning the plan already?"

"You always have a plan," Stormshade panted, "Until you don't." But by the time he had finished speaking, Swiftleap had disappeared, fleeing to the camp alongside his fellow warriors.

Stormshade followed them, paws scarcely touching the ground as he weaved between hostile ThunderClan warriors. As suddenly as Swiftleap had left, jaws sank into his scruff, and he was yanked back with a grunt. A pale golden paw rested on his throat, and his gaze was met with hostile green eyes. Brackenstar unsheathed his claws, rooting them harmlessly--but threateningly--in Stormshade's throat.

The battle grew silent. Goldentooth appeared at the entrance of camp, and Dapplefur, Deputy of ThunderClan, stalked around Stormshade. "We have a trophy," she boasted. Leaning in close to Stormshade, she added, "I bet it'd be easy to cut through that pretty-tom face, but--"

Brackenstar glared sharply at her, as if he was willing her to silence herself. Without another word, Dapplefur melted away into the mass of ThunderClan warriors, and Brackenstar opened his jaws to speak.

"I have one of your warriors, Goldentooth!" Brackenstar's face was marred by a horrific snarl. "Bring Cloudstar out here or I will kill him."

"You break our ancestors' code, Brackenstar." Goldentooth opened his jaws to begin another speech, but Brackenstar interjected.

"I am a Clan Leader," he snapped. "My word *is* the code."

"Kill me," Stormshade hissed to him. "Go ahead and try."

"Enough, Stormshade!" Goldentooth's eyes narrowed. He stepped out of camp fearlessly. "Look at yourself, Brackenstar. This is a pointless mission of what? Revenge?"

"You flooded our territory!"

"You have no proof of that," Goldentooth replied automatically. "You have spilt blood in the name of pride, Brackenstar. *Pride*. A disease that has corrupted you. And once this battle is won, you'll feel good for a little while, but someday that feeling will decay, and again you will have to hunt for another bloody victory." His tail flicked. "And your warriors and Clanmates will suffer for it." He continued to stroll forward.

"Not another step!" Brackenstar pushed his claws deeper into Stormshade's throat.

Stormshade met Goldentooth's gaze, mind racing. What was he going to do? He wriggled against Brackenstar's hold, and in response a russet ThunderClan tom pinned his lower body.

Goldentooth swept his tail. "I will give you a choice, Brackenstar. You can either leave this moor with your leaderlike dignity, or you can continue to fight. You can give in to your innermost desires and show us how much of an uncivilized, primal beast you really are." He drew a paw over his ear. "I'm sure an unwillingness to negotiate isn't a good look for a Clan's head."

Brackenstar bared his teeth, slowly turning his gaze towards Stormshade. Suddenly, he let him go, shoving him forward.

Stormshade stumbled forward, before stopping. He rounded on Brackenstar, but Goldentooth clamped his jaws down on his tail and pulled him back.

"You made the right choice--" Goldentooth began, before Tigerstorm yowled something from camp.

"They tricked us!" He cried. Stormshade whipped around and ducked back into camp as Goldentooth dove after him.

A column of ThunderClan warriors had breached the back of camp while Stormshade was being held prisoner.

"Nice going, rabbit-brain!" Brambleblaze snapped. "Hey, I would've liked some help while you and Swiftleap were confessing your love for one another."

"Goldentooth ordered a retreat!" Stormshade retorted. Goldentooth barged between them with an urgent haste.

"Shut up! Brambleblaze, defend Cloudstar and Mintfur. Stormshade, to the entrance!"

Brambleblaze shot a glare at Stormshade as he pelted towards Cloudstar's den. Goldentooth shouldered him aside and squeezed inside, Tigerstorm at his flank.

Stormshade tore his gaze away and made for the camp entrance. His fellow warriors had turned it into a chokepoint, and now ThunderClan warriors were streaming over the walls to bypass their defence.

Beestream limped away from the front line, blood streaming from her forehead and into her eyes.

Stormshade turned, racing towards her.

"Get to the fight!" Sunclaw snapped as he ran past his former apprentice. Stormshade ignored him and rushed to Beestream's side.

"Beestream!" Stormshade pressed against her flank urgently. "Are you okay? Is Hailpaw--"

"He's fine," she panted, lifting a bloody forepaw. The sound of enraged yowls and screeches of pain rose into the air, and she practically shouted to be heard over it. "The apprentices are in the training hollow."

"Are you okay? Who did this to you?"

Beestream stared at him with wide eyes. "Brackenstar. Stay away from him, he's--"

She had hardly begun to speak when Stormshade had turned away, sprinting towards the camp entrance. Four ThunderClan warriors burst through, descending on Galetrot, Claytail, and Rabbitspark and clearing the way for Brackenstar. Foxrunner laid in the middle of the clearing, a streak of blood running across her flank. A black ThunderClan she-cat stood over her, yowling triumphantly, but Stormshade ignored her.

Stormshade rushed towards the ThunderClan leader, slamming into his flank with a growl.

"You again--" Brackenstar fell to the ground, using Stormshade's own momentum to roll over when he landed. After a single moment, Stormshade was pinned down, his hind legs pummeling his opponent's stomach.

Brackenstar stepped back, using his forepaws to slam Stormshade's hind legs into the ground with the strength of a Clan Leader, before hooking his claws in the tunneler's shoulders and shaking him back and forth.

"I should've killed you," he spat, saliva drenching Stormshade's face. Then he looked up, in a sudden, jerky, eccentric movement. Paying Stormshade no more mind, he sprinted towards the leader's den, passing the brawling warriors, and disappeared inside.

Stormshade climbed to his paws with a grunt of pain. He could hear a much louder screech of pain, and in his peripheral vision he saw Galetrot grappling with a calico she-cat. With incredible speed, she had darted under him, taking his broken leg in her jaws and wrenching it to the side.

"Coming!" Stormshade climbed to his pauls and took off, but not before a streak of brown fur came into view, sliding beneath his stomach and using outstretched claws to rake through his belly fur. Simultaneously, the enemy kicked his hind legs out from under him. As Stormshade fell to the ground, the ThunderClan warrior hopped to her paws, raining blows down upon his forehead.

Stormshade rounded on her, swiping at her torso, but just in the nick of time she had slipped out of range. It was Dapplefur, ThunderClan's deputy.

Stormshade tried to remember the lessons he was previously teaching Hailpaw, and he allowed his legs to stiffen so she couldn't knock him over.

Dapplefur grinned deviously, before darting towards Stormshade again, but the grey warrior was ready.

He stepped back, dodging her first quick swipe, and feinted a blow at her head. As she ducked, Stormshade then swung his forepaw around and brought it colliding into her cheek, sending her stumbling back.

He was tempted to tackle her right then and there, but he had to restrain himself. His own momentum would be used against him. Instead, as quickly as he could, he lunged towards her hindquarters. Dapplefur dodged, but her tail streamed behind her, just as Stormshade had hoped for. He bit down on her tail, and the deputy screeched in pain as he yanked her backwards, pulling her to the ground. With a grunt, he raised a paw and snapped her tail. *So much for her balance!* Dapplefur writhed around on the camp floor in pain, before scrabbling to her paws and attempting to attack Stormshade once again.

With Dapplefur's tail bent, however, she simply wasn't as steady on her paws as she once was. Stormshade stood on his hind paws, bringing his entire weight down upon her back and pinning her. Only a few moments more passed before Brackenstar was driven from Cloudstar's den, with Tigerstorm and Goldentooth hissing and spitting at his heels.

"ThunderClan, retreat!"

Dapplefur spat on the ground as Stormshade released her. "You'll regret this," she growled.

"I'm sure I will," Stormshade replied icily. Dapplefur scowled and took off after her leader, bent tail streaming behind her, as

Thornface tore the calico ThunderClan she-cat from Galetrot's mangled leg.

Goldentooth returned to the leader's den, only to reemerge with Cloudstar, weak and hunched over, leaning against his shoulder. Mintfur rushed to her side, guiding her to the elder's den.

"What happened to her?" Stormshade tilted his head, padding towards his deputy and wincing in pain at the wounds Dapplefur had inflicted.

Goldentooth stared back at Stormshade sadly. "She was blinded," he murmured. "Brackenstar came in, and in the chaos..." he trailed off, for once unable to speak. And then, he mewed, "Cloudstar is no longer able to lead us."

Mintfur returned from the elder's den, crossing camp towards his herb stash. "Goldentooth, I can't take you to the moonpool tonight." He shook out his pelt, stressed. "There're too many wounded, and Cloudstar needs immediate attention."

"Don't worry," Goldentooth mewed. "Take as much time as you need. Their safety is more important."

Stormshade turned his attention to Beestream, who leaned against the tallrock. Stormshade licked her ear comfortingly, as Beestream stared admiringly up at Goldentooth. Stormshade felt jealous for a moment, but as he followed her gaze he couldn't help but feel hopeful, too.

Cloudstar's cruel reign was over.

II

Then

Wind ripped across the moor like frightened prey, flattening Stormshade's striped fur against his muscular frame.

He could feel someone glaring at him from the elder's den, and he shuddered. *How can she see me?* He thought, casting a glance towards the dark structure. *Isn't Cloudstar blind?*

It had been two days since ThunderClan's failed invasion. Galetrot was poking at the prey heap, Leopardheart pressed against his flank. A crude splint was attached to his twisted hind leg. Meanwhile, Mintfur, the Clan Medicine Cat, was trotting into camp with a fresh bundle of poppy seeds.

Stormshade gave Mintfur a nod; the tom returned it.

"Stormshade!" A she-cat's voice was raised above the murmur of camp. Mouseleap came trotting to Stormshade's side, eyes wide. "Stormshade, I need your help."

Stormshade's eyes narrowed as he turned to look at his former mate. Then his gaze softened, and for a moment, however brief, he could feel something deep within his chest melt. "What is it?" He inquired, voice suddenly gentle.

"Cloudstar," Mouseleap murmured. She looked away, ears flattening. "Her eyes hurt."

Stormshade recoiled, and the warmth in his chest gave way to solid ice. "You want me to help your mother?" He shook his head, and

shouldered past her. "No! Forget it."

"*Please*!" She stared at him with wide, imploring eyes.

Stormshade paused, eyes rolling as he turned back to her, and growled, "Your mother was horrible to me, Mouseleap. Absolutely horrible." He stopped, opening his jaws to speak again, but he hesitated.

"Stormshade," Mouseleap mewed, "I love you." She took a step towards him, her once-brilliant green eyes dull.

"I love you too." Stormshade sighed. He turned away, trying to avoid those green eyes. "But that never mattered. Mouseleap, I was always there for you. I did everything you asked of me." He shook out his pelt, and his voice grew lower, more determined. "But for your mother, nothing was good enough."

Mouseleap padded to his side, brushing her flank against his. "Stormshade," she murmured, "*No one* was good enough, not for her. It wasn't personal."

Stormshade looked away from her with a snort.

"StarClan," Mouseleap exclaimed, "Don't you ever think of anyone except for yourself?"

"I do, Mouseleap!" Stormshade snapped to attention, staring back at her. Voice soft, he continued, "I think... I think about you all the time. I think about what we could've been. Every single day." Just then, an image of Beestream flashed through his mind, and he added, "But I've found someone else."

"Stormshade!" Mouseleap pleaded. "An old cat is in pain! Forget the past and... do what's right!"

Stormshade stared back at her, jaws open to make a response. The ice in his chest shattered -- his heart with it -- and he meowed softly, "I always did what was right for you. Time and again, I ignored the past, but I cannot do that any longer. There comes a time where doing what is right no longer *feels* right. Mouseleap, I can't do this anymore." He blinked at her, the anger in his eyes

beginning to die out. Mouseleap continued to stare at him, searching his gaze as if she hoped he was lying.

Then

"To be honest," Swiftleap mewed, "I'm not even really sure where she got this idea."

Stormshade pondered his friend's words for a few moments as the pair descended into the tunnel entrance. It was relatively far from the ThunderClan border. The first half of it had been stabilized, its walls packed with mud and now dried clay, thanks to the fine work of Shaleflame and Brambleblaze.

"What, the tunnel idea?" Stormshade's whiskers twitched uneasily as he bent to peer into its foreboding entrance.

"The poison," Swiftleap responded. He followed his friend's gaze. "How could ThunderClan be poisoning us? None of it makes sense. It just seems like--" he broke off. Stormshade stepped into the tunnel. Swiftleap had left an uncomfortable silence in the air.

"Like what?"

"Like..." Swifleap's face was wrinkled as he struggled to put his words respectfully. "She's just trying to start a war." Swiftleap ducked inside after him, and Stormshade stepped aside to give room. He added, "...And I don't like it."

Stormshade mulled the words over as they trekked ever deeper into the tunnels. He could feel cold earth brushing against his fur, and the sound of dripping water echoed ominously in the darkness. At long last, he mewed, "Cloudstar was *always* a fighter. It was an admirable thing. But then, after the--" His words caught in his mouth. The occurrence he was thinking of had been a forbidden subject for seasons, and to even try to utter it seemed unnatural.

Swiftleap's eyes widened, shining in the darkness. "You don't think--"

"She wasn't always like this," Stormshade interjected. "It broke her, and I guess she does what she does to protect what she has left." He

felt a pang in his chest as an image of Mouseleap flashed through his mind, and he added, "Perhaps ThunderClan is a threat in her mind."

"StarClan," Swiftleap breathed. "How did we end up with a leader like *her?*"

They sharply turned left, then, after a few moments, back to the right. Swiftleap's fur stood on end, and a rabbit could be heard scuffling in the distance, as if it knew something bad was about to happen and wished to escape.

And yet the two toms walked, padding warily through the tunnels with their ear-tips brushing against the mud-streaked ceiling.

"Oof!" Swiftleap stumbled back, blinking. He lifted a paw to rub at his nose. "That's the wall!"

Stormshade pawed the earth above him. Unease pricked through his fur, but he wouldn't dare show it. "Let's bring it down."

"Now?"

"What?" Stormshade unsheathed his claws, hooking them into the earth. "Are you scared?"

"No," Swiftleap snapped defensively, "Just cautious." With a grumble, he shouldered Stormshade aside, hooking his claws into the loose earth. A droplet of water landed on his face, and he flinched.

It wasn't long before water began to pour from above, and the cave began to rumble. Chunks fell from the wall and smacked into the ground.

"Already?" Stormshade stumbled back, narrowly dodging a clump of clay.

Swiftleap flattened his ears. "We've barely started digging! C'mon!" He tugged at his partner's tail. "It's coming down!"

Stormshade turned tail and fled, but he felt his paws slip on the

mud, grunting as his chin hit the ground. Mud began to press against his shoulders like the paws of a burly warrior.

And then there was darkness.

Now

Stormshade couldn't stop thinking about Mouseleap as he entered Goldenstar's den. *The audacity!* he thought, outraged.

"Just the tom I was looking for!" Goldenstar's eyes shone. "I need you for a diplomatic mission, Stormshade. Can I rely on you?"

Stormshade nodded, brushing Mouseleap off his mind -- almost. "You can always rely on me," he mewed proudly.

"I am a new leader," Goldenstar explained, "And I would like to start things off on the right paw. Tigerstorm and I spoke, and we'd like you to be our ambassador."

"I will represent our Clan well," Stormshade mewed without hesitation. He blinked, and swiftly added, "Uh, it's an honour." The grey tom dipped his head, but his mind was swimming--mostly with pure pride, but also with worry. In between the pride and worry... he didn't know. The whispers of two cats seemed to brush past his ears.

"You're the perfect representation of our Clan," Goldenstar carried on. Smoothly, as if he knew exactly what he was saying, he meowed, "You're good-looking. When cats think of WindClan, we want a cat like you to enter your mind. And... you can talk *well enough* when pressed."

Stormshade couldn't help but smirk at his leader's words, eagerly nodding in agreement. "That's all true," he mewed, pleased. He felt warm. Mouseleap was completely driven from his thoughts.

"I want you to go to RiverClan bearing my warm regards," Goldenstar continued. "Assure them of my peaceful intentions, and willingness to help them with their problems. Only good things."

Stormshade tilted his head. "That's all?"

"We don't need anything particularly detailed," Goldenstar told him. "Platitudes are eagerly accepted, and nonbinding."

"And... you trust me to not screw things up?"

"It's just a sign of goodwill, Stormshade." Goldenstar explained. "The tongue is mightier than the claw. If we just act kind for the sake of acting kind, then to attack us is unthinkable."

"Yeah!" Tigerstorm nodded enthusiastically. "Goldenstar has it all figured out. We'll be the most popular Clan on the lake. Anyone who attacks us would be seen as aggressive and evil. The whole lake would rush to our defense!"

"Indeed." Goldenstar purred. "If ThunderClan pulls any stunt again, they'd become outcasts. We would've built up a reputation of being so peaceful that only a band of murderers would have a reason to invade us." He paused, huffing. "That's the plan, of course."

Stormshade was grinning by then. "Can I take a friend?"

* * *

"This'll be fun!" Beestream mewed encouragingly, pressing against Stormshade's side.

"I just hope Swiftleap can handle Hailpaw," Stormshade sighed. He loved his apprentice, and felt guilty leaving him at camp, but something about being alone with Beestream felt so natural to him. He looked at her, into her beautiful eyes, and felt something he hadn't felt in moons. This feeling suddenly brought back memories of Mouseleap, and he reluctantly tore his gaze away.

"He'll be *fine*..." Beestream drawled cheerily. "I'm more worried about you." As they crested a hill, she pointed at the river that marked the extent of RiverClan's territory. "The water won't scare you, right?"

Stormshade tried to resist a shudder. He had bad experiences with water, but he didn't want the she-cat to know how nervous he was. He shrugged with a deep grunt, simply mewing, "Why would it?"

The she-cat nudged him supportively, not for a heartbeat buying his act. "I'll help you along," she promised. "Just don't think about the tunnels."

Stormshade's shoulders loosened. "When you're here.." he began.

"Spit it out!"

"I can't think of anything but you," he admitted. "It's great to be alone out here."

She softened, silent for a few moments as they continued towards the river. Stormshade could hear her delicate pawsteps as she treaded on the grass. "Stormshade..." she sighed, "You don't know how much that means to me."

They walked. The river could be heard bubbling in the distance, but the only thing Stormshade heard was her breath. He could only feel her fur pressing against his, only to see her sparkling green eyes. Those green pools remained even when he blinked, burnt into his vision.

He shook his head, attempting to distract himself, when he felt his paws begin to freeze.

Water rushed by before them, and he stepped back, droplets of clear, cold water flying from his forelegs. Stormshade huffed, trying not to yelp in surprise.

Beestream furrowed her brow, unwilling to get wet. Instead, she prodded him with a soft forepaw. "Stepping stones, you stupid furball!" She trotted upstream and onto the stones, confidently crossing them. As soon as she landed on the other side, a RiverClan patrol burst from the bushes.

"Stop!" A pretty grey tabby she-cat stalked forward, two other RiverClan warriors fanning out behind her. She spat in Beestream's face. "What is your business on our territory?"

Stormshade's eyes widened, and he sloshed across the river, prior reservations discarded. "Don't hurt her!" Barreling from the river, he slid in between the two she-cats.

"Maybe I won't," she snarled, "Maybe I will," the RiverClan she-cat's tail flicked. "Tell me your business here."

Stormshade ignored the powerful urge to shake his pelt out. "We're here to speak with Troutstar."

"Why?"

Stormshade met her gaze. "You're not Troutstar."

"It doesn't matter," she replied. "You won't get to him if you don't tell me."

Stormshade exchanged a glance with Beestream, mind racing, before sighing. "It's pretty good, actually." He shook out his fur, then stopped himself. I *can't* drench *them*! "The river freezes over in the leaf-bare, and Golden*tooth*--"

The silver warrior rolled her eyes. "WindClan's offering to help feed us?"

"Yes!" Stormshade nodded. Beestream tilted her head briefly, but she played along, forcing her fur to flatten and raising her tail.

The RiverClan she-cat scoffed. "We don't need your help," she meowed firmly. "RiverClan has always been the best-fed Clan, even in the leaf-bare."

"I'd still like to take it up with your leader," Stormshade told her, struggling to hold on to his patience. "I'm sure he wouldn't dismiss such kindness so soon."

The silver she-warrior growled, frustrated. "Fine. Come on."

RiverClan's territory was disgusting. Stormshade flinched with every step.

"Why is everything so *damp*?" Beestream grumbled as the ground squelched beneath her paws. She shifted closer to Stormshade. "Why did you tell them our plan so readily?" She nodded up ahead, towards the RiverClan patrol.

Stormshade blinked. He didn't know. "I thought..." He blinked again. "I'm not sure."

"You're a special cat," Beestream mused. Stormshade stared at her with warm eyes.

"I knew *that* already."

"Be quiet!" Beestream cuffed him over the ear. "They might hear us!"

"So what if they do?" Stormshade licked her cheek.

Just ahead, he could see a cluster of strange, reed-woven structures. Are those dens? He shuddered. *They look horrible!*

A black RiverClan tom seemed to notice his expression. "Pretty great, isn't it?" He licked his shoulder. "We build them from scratch out of--"

The silver-furred she-warrior had suddenly appeared, glaring at the black tom as an elderly grey tabby looked up from the RiverClan prey heap.

"I smell the moor," he rumbled.

The silver warrior waved her tail, stepping aside to reveal Stormshade and Beestream. "It's a delegation, Troutstar. I found them sneaking around the border."

Troutstar's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and he gritted his teeth. Nonetheless, he allowed his voice to grow soft. "Of course. Any peaceful delegation is welcome in my camp."

Stormshade allowed his shoulders to loosen, and he couldn't help but feel comforted at the sound of Troutstar's elder-like voice. For a moment he felt like he was a kit, listening to the tales and half-truths of Wildflame, but that feeling swiftly vanished when Troutstar eyed the silver warrior. "Is Timberclaw with you, Oceaneyes?"

"He's still on patrol, Troutstar." The silver warrior -- Oceaneyes -- dipped her head reverently.

"Hmph." Troutstar huffed, and his gaze grew less soft when he looked at Beestream and Stormshade again. "Which one of you is in charge?"

Stormshade tilted his head. "Well--"

"*He* is." Beestream nudged her friend forward encouragingly. "I was brought along to make sure no one hurts him."

Stormshade felt heat spread throughout his pelt, not from the several cats staring at him but from Beestream's suddenly protective words. *I don't need protection*! For a moment he thought about her soft pelt winding around him, but he regained his composure and nodded coolly. "I have a message from my leader," he announced.

Troutstar's gaze shifted towards Oceaneyes. "Accompany us to my den, please." Whiskers twitching and tail flicking, he turned and disappeared into a flimsy collection of reeds. Stormshade blinked.

That's it? StarClan, a Leader *lives there! What kind of--*

Oceaneyes gave him a rough jab in the ribs. "Come on." With a shake of her head, she padded ahead. Stormshade blinked again, before trotting after her.

The den was much warmer than Stormshade would've guessed. With Oceaneyes at his flank, he shouldered his way between two bundles of reeds. The grey she-cat flinched away from him as if he was sick. Without speaking a word, she sat at the edge of the den, tucking her paws beneath her.

"Now--" Troutstar sighed, curling up in his nest with a wheeze. "What did Cloudstar want to tell me?"

"Nothing, Troutstar." Stormshade nodded respectfully. "Cloudstar has stepped down from her duties as Clan leader. Goldenstar sends his regards -- through me."

Troutstar blinked for a few moments, although he seemed unsurprised. After a while, he mewed, "And you are his deputy?"

"No -- I am his ambassador." Stormshade corrected him. "Goldenstar

wants to start things off on the right paw," He straightened up. "We're all still reeling from some of Cloudstar's... rash decisions over the past couple of seasons. WindClan wants to promote friendship across the lake. We want to help everyone, and... right our wrongs."

"Do you propose an alliance?" Troutstar's tail flicked thoughtfully.

"If you'd like -- or aid, too." He added quickly.

"And what would WindClan want in return?" The RiverClan Leader's voice was now somewhat suspicious, and he spoke very slowly.

"Nothing," Stormshade replied proudly. "All we want is friendship."

Troutstar tilted his head to the side, huffing, before he shook his head. "I hope Goldenstar doesn't waste too much time sending diplomats to spew platitudes and trick foreigners."

Stormshade's face fell. *Platitudes*. He worked his claws into the ground. *He's not falling for it.*

Oceaneyes suddenly broke her silence. "May I escort the WindClanner from your den, Troutstar?"

"Please."

Oceaneyes nodded seriously, returning to her paws and flicking Stormshade with her tail. "C'mon," she snapped. "I need to talk to you."

Stormshade cast Troutstar an uncertain glance before once again taking off after the grey she-cat, who led him to the side of camp. "Sit."

Stormshade tilted his head, confused, but he sat nonetheless. "What is it?" He inquired.

"You're spineless," Oceaneyes meowed immediately, stalking around him in tight circles.

"W-what?" Stormshade's confusion swiftly subsided, giving way to pure hurt. *Why do I care?* He asked himself. He could feel his fur

rising along his spine. The praise given to him by Goldenstar suddenly meant nothing.

"A coward," Oceaneyes continued. "Your Clan doesn't want to face its mistakes, so it masks its shame with friendliness."

"No." Stormshade shook his head firmly. "No, no, I'm here for Goldenstar. This--" he gulped, blinking, "--this isn't about Cloudstar."

"Do you think anyone believes that?" A soft tail slowly slid down the tom's spine. Oceaneyes was flattening his spiked fur. Stormshade felt his skin go red. He had never felt so embarrassed in his life. *Make it stop!* He pleaded.

"I--"

"*No one* believes that, Stormshade." She purred. "*Everyone* knows about you and Cloudstar. Why else would Goldenstar send you? Why isn't your new deputy here right now?" Her warm breath stirred his ear fur, and he could feel her almost curl around him.

"*Everyone*?" Stormshade's ears flattened. *I should shred her,* he thought. *But I can't do it in full view of the entire Clan!*

"*Everyone*," Oceaneyes repeated. "You will always be an outcast. Haunted by memories, shunned by denmates, and used by your naive leader. So yes--" she growled, "You *are* spineless."

Stormshade could feel himself start to shudder. Where was Beestream?

Oceaneyes relished in his discomfort. "And if you weren't so handsome--" She shifted, flexing his claws just a mousetail away from the WindClan tom's face, "I'd claw you for it right here, in front of the entire Clan."

Stormshade gulped. "You're..."

"A RiverClanner. And you're from WindClan. We're enemies, and that's that." Oceaneyes suddenly withdrew, shoving him away. "Go."

* * *

"What'd you talk about?" Beestream and Stormshade were now alone, having crossed the river under the watchful eyes of RiverClan warriors. "With Oceaneyes, I mean. It looked like she was really chewing you out."

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Stormshade told her, tail swishing cheerfully. Internally, he felt dreadful. Would Oceaneyes tell everyone that Stormshade was a coward?

Am I a coward?

"Oh?" Beestream's voice lowered mischievously, and she cast a glance back towards RiverClan's territory. "Just normal inter-Clan dialogue?"

"Yes!" Stormshade insisted. "It was nothing!"

The mischievous sparkle in Beestream's eyes faded, only to give way to subtle concern. "What's bothering you?"

"Nothing,"

"Something's going on in that head of yours, Stormshade." They crested a hill, and Beestream tapped his forehead with the tip of her tail.

Stormshade fumbled for problems. He had many, but he couldn't speak about Oceaneyes's scathing remarks. "M-Mouseleap," he stuttered.

Beestream only blinked at him. WindClan's camp could be seen in the distance, but only a little.

"She, uhm.." Stormshade chuckled nervously, drawing a paw over his ears. "She wants me to help Cloudstar, Beestream. And I just don't... I don't know."

The she-cat pressed against him, and a wave of heat seemed to fill him, causing his legs to nearly buckle. "Here's what you should do..."

* * *

"Hey." Stormshade laid a big paw on Mouseleap's shoulder, chest filled with dread. "I... decided to help you."

Mouseleap blinked up at him gratefully, but her nose twitched. She smells Beestream on my pelt. Her happiness gave way to jealousy. "...Did she tell you to help me?"

Stormshade looked away shyly. "Yeah."

"So that's it?" Mouseleap sounded more sad than angry. "I'm second best now?"

"Second best?" Stormshade was suddenly outraged. "Second best? Really, Mouseleap? Really?" He shook his head. "My whole life, you were everything I hoped for." He gritted his teeth. "All we've been through, and you give it up -- you give me up -- for that -- that -- monster?"

Mouseleap bristled. "That's not fair!"

"Not fair? You know what's not fair, Mouseleap?" Stormshade's tail lashed. "*I'll* tell you what's unfair!"

"She's not a monster!" She choked for a moment. "She's my mother!"

Stormshade growled, then shuddered. "We could've been... I mean, we could--" He shuddered again. "--Could've had so much together. StarClan, Mouseleap, you're a grown warrior! Can't you just live on your own?"

Mouseleap sank her claws into the ground. "I'm all she has!"

"Is that it?" Stormshade thrusted his face towards hers, so closely that their muzzles brushed. "Is that the kind of cat your mother has made you into? Leading toms on, then abandoning them? Claiming that we can't even be together and then suddenly turning up the moment you need help?"

Mouseleap stumbled back, but then straightened. "If you love me so much, why are you acting like -- *that* -- with Beestream?"

Stormshade glared at her. "Why do you think? What we had when

we were younger -- that could've been -- I mean --" he tucked his chin into his chest, sniffling. "I can only wait for you for so long. And I --" His voice cracked, and he turned away, salty tears beginning to roll down his cheeks. He couldn't let her see him like this. "--I just don't want to be alone."

Mouseleap's nose twitched. "Are you going to help me?"

Stormshade nodded meekly, flopping back onto his haunches. "Yeah," he murmured, "I guess so. What does she need?"

Mouseleap cast a guilty glance towards the elder's den. "I need to get moss-water for her eyes. Mintfur's medicine is making them sting."

"And..?"

"So you need to watch her while I get it!" Her eyes narrowed as she let out a *mrrow*! Of frustration. "StarClan, I've left her alone for long enough!" With a growl, she shouldered past him.

Stormshade turned to watch her go, but she caught him.

"What're you doing? Go watch her!"

Stormshade nodded slowly and retraced her prior steps, ducking into the elder's den to see a black-and-white she-cat, her ears angled in his direction.

"No amount of good deeds, tom, will make me like you. My daughter will never be your mate."

Stormshade suppressed a growl, his fur pricking uneasily. "I--uh--Mouseleap wanted me to watch you."

"She's a good cat," Cloudstar purred. "A very good cat. When I lost the rest of her litter, Stormshade..." She trailed off dramatically -- Stormshade couldn't detect any sadness in her mew. "...nobody seemed to understand."

Stormshade settled down next to her, only to yelp in surprise as the blind she-cat swiftly grabbed his scruff, roughly pulling him

towards her.

"You never *really* know what it's like, Stormshade, until you lose those you love." Stormshade attempted to wriggle free, but she pulled him back towards herself, hissing a grave accusation into his ear. "Are you trying to take my daughter, Stormshade?"

"I--"

"Goldenstar is in charge now, but know this -- you will never escape me."

"Ah!" Mouseleap squeezed inside, clutching moss between her chest and her chin. "So close to one another already?"

Cloudstar let Stormshade go, and the big grey tom felt his fur heat up.

"You should leave," the disgraced WindClan leader mewed. "Wouldn't want to miss the gathering, right?"

The what? Stormshade shot her a bewildered look, practically pelting out of the den. His eyes widened in astonishment when he saw Goldenstar on the tallrock.

"All cats old enough to tunnel gather below the tallrock! It is time I select participants in the gathering!"

Stormshade didn't even bother hiding the unease in his eyes, and both Swiftleap and Brambleblaze noticed.

"Are you okay?" Swiftleap nosed him.

"Of course he isn't okay!" Brambleblaze scoffed. "He still can't believe a she-cat would reject him!"

Stormshade's eyes narrowed, and he glared at Brambleblaze. "Excuse me?"

"Mouseleap, you stupid furball." Brambleblaze saw Goldenstar's gaze sweep over them, and he lowered his mew to a hiss. "She really threw you to the moor."

"Her mother's wounded!" Stormshade snapped.

"Yeah, right." Brambleblaze sniffed. "Cloudstar's always been messed up."

Stormshade prepared to harshly retort, but Goldenstar cleared his throat. "I would like for Stormshade, Hailpaw, Brambleblaze, Galetrot, Leopardheart, Swiftleap, and Sunclaw to join me."

"I'd be honoured." Sunclaw dipped his head reverently, while Hailpaw burst into the camp, hopping onto Stormshade's back.

"We're going??" He mewed. "I can't wait! Last time, Cherrypaw showed me this weird climbing move, but then Dapplefur snapped at her to get down from the tree, and--"

Brambleblaze tilted his head. "What about Dapplefur?"

* * *

Hailpaw's excitement seemed to die down a little with every tail-length, and Stormshade hardly kept him in line on the trail towards the meeting isle. In his destraction he accidentally bumped into Galetrot, who had come to a full stop.

"Hey!" Stormshade pawed at his aching nose.

"Sorry!" Galetrot's eyes widened. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah-- it's nothing." Stormshade shook out his pelt. "What're you stopping for?"

Galetrot angled his ears towards Goldenstar, who stood across from Brackenstar of ThunderClan. The two leaders exchanged icy glances.

"Well?" Brackenstar's teeth were gritted.

"You may go first, Brackenstar." Goldenstar dipped his head to his peer out of what could only have been false respect. "You are my elder."

"Now you say it." Brackenstar snarled and raised his tail, signaling for his cats to follow him as he trotted across the tree-bridge.

As soon as they had passed it was WindClan's turn to cross.

"I almost think Goldenstar might be too polite," Leopardheart whispered as she climbed onto the tree. She peered over her shoulder, her gaze meeting Galetrot's.

"He's our leader." Sunclaw, directly behind Stormshade, snorted. Hailpaw shot him a look and trotted more closely to Stormshade's side, but Sunclaw didn't notice. "He knows what he's doing."

Stormshade gave an irritated flick of his ears, watching as Leopardheart and Galetrot leapt from the tree-trunk and onto the island. Stormshade prepared to follow suit, but he lost his balance as Hailpaw bounded ahead, beelining for the apprentices.

"Hey--Hailpaw!" Stormshade called out after the grey tom, but received no response. "Stupid kit," he muttered.

Swiftleap was settling down not far from the tree bridge, eyes wide. Stormshade trotted over to him, just barely avoiding a cuff around the ears from Brambleblaze.

"Stormshade." Swiftleap lifted a paw, jabbing it in the direction of a throng of ThunderClan cats. "Look!"

In the centre of the throng, a star itself -- *herself* -- had blessed the Clans with its presence.

Her long grey fur. Clear, sparkling blue eyes. Her soft ears.

Stormshade's eyes lingered for a moment, but then he tore them away. "We're not apprentices anymore," he sniffed. Somehow, he didn't want to be caught staring -- it felt like he was unworthy.

"It's good to see a cat like you getting some self-control!" Brambleblaze's voice was chipper as he sauntered by, pausing at Stormshade's flank. "If only you started a little sooner."

Stormshade grunted, yanking his paw free. "What do you mean by

that?"

"I mean," Brambleblaze explained slowly, "That you can hardly make it a moon without another mate." He licked his paw, drawing it over his ears. "You'd better stop staring at Cinderdusk."

"I wasn't," Stormshade snapped back. "*You're* the one who knows her name."

"Oh, Stormshade. There is only one she-cat for me." His gaze briefly flitted to a throng of cats -- Dapplefur, Leopardheart, Rushwind, Oceaneyes -- across the island. "...Not like you'd understand."

Swiftleap growled, as if he knew what Brambleblaze's next words would be.

"Poor Beestream. Poor Mouseleap."

Stormshade felt a hollow feeling in his chest. Brambleblaze poked a claw into Stormshade's shoulder, slowly drawing it up towards his cheek. "How many times will you lead those poor, lovesick warriors on? When will they ever learn?"

Stormshade growled. He planted his own paw on top of Brambleblaze's, rooting his claws deep inside of it. "You'd shut up if you knew what was good for you," he snarled. "I'm getting tired of your fox-dung. Long tired of it."

"You seem sure of yourself, for a cat who doesn't know who to love."

"I know who to *hate*." Stormshade's nose twitched. "Go away."

"Y-you should leave." Swiftleap nudged Brambleblaze. Stormshade could see him casting sidelong glances towards Cinderdusk.

"Yes, you should." Stormshade sniffed. "I'd hate to be forced to--"

"Let the Gathering begin!" Goldenstar's booming yowl swept across the island, and suddenly all voices grew silent. Cinderdusk's eyes brightened when she saw him speak; Stormshade felt jealousy surge through his pelt.

"Perhaps I shall begin." A big, light brown tom who stank of ShadowClan cleared his throat.

"Of course, Thornstar." Goldenstar's sickeningly polite voice carried perfectly across the clearing.

Thornstar's gaze swept the clearing. "It is good to announce to you that my deputy, Nightshade, has finished training his apprentice. Everybody, welcome Stonefang to warriorhood!"

Stormshade saw Stonefang across the clearing, his chest puffed out as the assembled warriors chanted his name. He still looked somewhat like an apprentice. Nightshade ducked out from his place with the other deputies to give Stonefang an approving lick.

ShadowClan always likes to act so kind during these gatherings.

Brackenstar scowled.

And ThunderClan always makes demands.

Swiftleap seemed to read Stormshade's thoughts. "It's almost like ShadowClan and ThunderClan swapped," he whispered. Shooting another look towards Cinderdusk, he added, "Do I look okay?"

Stormshade rolled his eyes, using a paw to direct Swiftleap's muzzle towards the leaders. "Don't look at her!" He snapped.

Sparrowstar, the SkyClan leader, took a step forward. "Hunting has been well," he mewed, "Although ThunderClan has been spotted encroaching on our borders. Know that--"

"--Because Cloudstar sabotaged our territory!" Brackenstar cut in.

A gasp rippled across the clearing. Hackles rose and WindClan warriors threw defensive glances.

Sparrowstar blinked. "Goldentooth?" He prompted.

Goldenstar dipped his head respectfully. "You'll forgive me for correcting you, my friend. I'm Golden*star* now."

Troutstar nodded gravely, eyes flitting towards Stormshade. *He remembers our meeting.*

"Cloudstar was gravely injured in an unprovoked ThunderClan attack," Goldenstar explained. "She was blinded in the chaos, and nestridden."

Cats across the clearing gasped, shooting fearful looks towards the ThunderClan warriors.

Brackenstar's tail lashed. "Unprovoked?" His eyes seemed to be little balls of flame. "The tunnels under our territory collapsed. Our prey is scarce and our land is flooded. Two apprentices nearly died."

"You have no proof that we did that," Goldenstar replied coolly. "WindClan has never made use of tunnels."

Brackenstar let out a loud, imposing laugh. "Really? Then I guess it's a coincidence that the most warlike leader on the lake seemed fixated on our border. And you-- you've always been her good little puppet." He planted a paw on Goldenstar's chest. Godenstar looked down at the ThunderClan leader's paw, then back up at his face.

"My friend, I would... advise you to rethink your words."

"Why should he?" Troutstar's whiskers twitched, poking out of his muzzle's greying fur. "You sent a warrior to my camp, asking for an alliance. What are you planning?"

Stormshade's eyes narrowed. Goldenstar's eyes only blinked with polite confusion.

"I only wished to begin my tenure diplomatically," he mewed. "I was not aware that politeness was such a crime."

"It *is*, for a Clan like yours. We'll never forget Cloudstar." Troutstar's tail lashed.

"Then perhaps I shall take my kindness to those who are mature enough to discern between one cat and another." Then Goldenstar addressed the assembled warriors. "My friends -- this is the lake. Our ancestors came here for a new start, and new opportunities.

You do not have to forget, Troutstar, but you can always make room for a new start."

"And what kind of new start are you proposing, Goldenstar?" Brackenstar growled dubiously. "We both know what you did."

"What I *did*?" Goldenstar's voice lowered. "What are you suggesting?"

"Nothing." His imposing ThunderClanner gaze washed over the island. "But I was in the den when it all... happened. Not even you can deny that," he added to Goldenstar. Thornstar, Troutstar, and Sparrowstar each exchanged curious glances. Tigerstorm, Goldenstar's new deputy, shifted uncomfortably at the foot of the tree. Stormshade looked to Swiftleap, but the tom was distracted. *StarClan!*

Brackenstar perked up suddenly. "Well!" He exclaimed. "Goldenstar -- I'd suggest you think long and hard about this meeting. ThunderClan declares the Gathering adjourned!" He leapt from the Great Tree, signalling with his tail for his warriors to follow him.

And, in an instant, Cinderdusk was gone. Troutstar was next, throwing a hostile gaze towards Goldenstar before scrabbling down the tree, followed by a more sympathetic Thornstar and a rather confused Sparrowstar.

Goldenstar himself simply shrugged, confidently bounding to the roots of the tree. Tigerstorm, faithful as ever, fell in behind him. Stormshade cuffed his shoulder as he passed.

"Hey," He hissed, "We need to talk."

Tigerstorm hesitated for a moment, before prodding at Goldenstar. They conferred for a moment. Goldenstar nodded. Tigerstorm turned back to Stormshade. "We can set out while Goldenstar rallies the warriors," he mewed. "Let's go."

The tree-bridge was wet with RiverClan pawmarks and stank of ShadowClan pine. *The island smells horrible with all these Clans crammed onto it,* Stormshade mused.

"It's about Goldenstar," Stormshade mewed cautiously.

"You wanted to ask about Goldenstar?" Tigerstorm's mew was incredulous. "Aren't you confident in his ability to lead us?"

"I'm very confident," Stormshade mewed defensively. "But... I heard Brackenstar."

"Brackenstar!" Tigerstorm spat. He suddenly seemed aggravated, and tried to trot away.

Stormshade blocked his path. "Tigerstorm, you were in that den. What happened with Cloudstar?"

Tigerstorm blinked at him for a moment, before nodding. "I suppose...." he began reluctantly, before pausing. "It was a very stressful situation." They ascended a hill, weaving through the tussocks and heather. It was a very long time before Tigerstorm spoke again.

"Goldenstar and I were with Cloudstar, and Brackenstar came in... and then he just... y'know."

"Who?" Stormshade asked urgently. "Who 'just?'"

"*He* did." Tigerstorm clearly didn't wish to elaborate. "He got Cloudstar, in a bad way. But it was a difficult situation," he added quickly. "We're all trying to make the right choice."

Stormshade stared at him for a few seconds, eyes narrowed. Tigerstorm carried on.

"Goldenstar is bringing WindClan back into the light." He lifted a striped brown paw to wipe at his face. "We don't need headstrong young warriors getting in our way."

III

Thanks to florapetals for beta reading parts of this chapter!

Now

"Isn't he cute?" Beestream leaned against Stormshade's shoulder, eyes half-closed. "He looks just like you."

Stormshade followed her gaze, squirming. Hailpaw was stumbling over his own paws, attempting to come up with his own battle move. "Is he cute because he looks like me?"

"Absolutely." Her words made Stormshade wriggle a little, and he could feel her tongue swiping around his ear.

"I'm not cute," He mewed stiffly. "I prefer 'handsome.'"

"Well, I think you're cute." She licked his ear once more, and then added wistfully, "I wish I got an apprentice."

"You'll get one someday," Stormshade reassured her. "For what it's worth? I'm glad that you're helping me train Hailpaw. I've... been distracted lately." He licked his chest.

"Let's talk about it." Beestream nudged him, grinning. Stormshade purred.

"Hailpaw!" He called. "Beestream and I need to talk. If you can

follow our scent trail, we won't go on a dawn patrol tomorrow!"

Hailpaw brightened. "Really?" He chirped. "I'll catch you when you least expect it!"

"Give us a head start, at least! Come on, Beestream!" Stormshade jabbed her ribs playfully, trotting into the heather.

His mood soured as soon as they were out of Hailpaw's view.

"So..." Beestream began, padding alongside him, "What's on your mind?"

"Brackenstar was weird at the gathering last night," was all Stormshade mewed. "He was confrontational."

Beestream seemed thoughtful for a second. Her tail swung through the air, swatting lightly at a fly on Stormshade's flank. "Towards Goldenstar?"

"Yes!" Stormshade mewed. "Towards Goldenstar!" He pressed against Beestream, leading her around a bundle of tussocks. The river could be heard gurgling in the distance, and Stormshade felt a twinge of dread. *I hope I don't see Oceaneyes again.*

Beestream froze. "Rabbit!" She whispered.

Stormshade's eyes widened. "I can't hunt aboveground!" He hissed.

"Why not? Scared of being outdone by a she-cat?"

"I--" Stormshade blinked, ears flattening. "No..?"

Beestream looked dubious. "Really, Stormshade?"

Stormshade averted his gaze. "I'm a tunneler," he mewed shyly, "Not a moor-runner. I don't want to make a fool of myself, Beestream. Least of all in front of you."

Beestream seemed to melt before Stormshade's eyes. "Aw! Stormshade--" She gushed, "--You... you make me--"

"I know." Stormshade touched his nose to hers, looking into her eyes, and purred. "Let's get that rabbit, Beestream."

The moor runner blinked, and then nodded weakly. "Okay. Taste the air."

Stormshade's jaws parted. *I smell it!* "I remember this from my apprenticeship."

"It takes a lot more to chase prey than a quarter moon of running classes." Beestream giggled. "Notice anything about the wind?"

"It's flowing, um... from the river."

Beestream licked his cheek. "Which means...?"

"The rabbit is along the riverbank."

Beestream's whiskers twitched with approval. "Very good! Come on, moor-runner!" With surprising speed and agility, she bounded into the heather, tail held high.

Stormshade's mouth opened, and he struggled to sputter a "Wait up!" before he stumbled after her.

The wind pushed against him, slowing his pace, and yet Beestream seemed unaffected. Stormshade admired her as she loped through the grass. The wind pressed her fur against her muscular frame, and her tail excitedly whipped to and fro. *I'll never catch up to her!*

Stormshade gritted his teeth, rooting his claws into the ground as he pelted towards her. Beestream suddenly flattened herself, shooting Stormshade a look. "Down!" She hissed.

Stormshade's eyes widened, and he promptly threw himself to the ground, sliding to a halt alongside her. Beestream lifted a paw, waving dust away with a sneeze.

"You'll be lucky to have not scared the poor thing away!" She coughed.

"Sorry--"

Bestream pressed her tail against his lips, craning her neck to peer through the grass. "The rabbit's still there. Stormshade, can you see it?"

Stormshade followed her gaze. The rabbit sat a few tail-lengths from the river, nibbling at the grass alongside the shore. He felt a soft paw pressing against his shoulders, flattening him back against the ground.

"This is a good spot for a beginner," Beestream mewed. "The rabbit won't go into the water, so that means the only way for him to run is into our territory."

"Ok--"

"Sh!" Beestream's eyes narrowed. She jabbed a paw over Stormshade's shoulders, towards a fallen tree. "I will hide in that thing's roots. Wait for me to get into position, and then scare the rabbit."

"How do you know it'll run towards--"

Beestream shot him a look. "Trust me." She circled behind him, sliding into the heather.

And then Stormshade was alone. His eyes locked onto the tree, waiting intently for the she-cat to appear. He watched as she crouched underneath its roots, ears flat. She nodded.

Stormshade turned towards the rabbit and, painstakingly, stepped forward. *Don't step on a twig. Don't step on a twig. Don't step on a twig.*

The wind increased in intensity, howling across the lake and pushing a blade of grass into his eye. Stormshade hissed sharply, swatting it away.

And then he heard something that made his heart leap.

"Beestream!" Hailpaw called. "I found you!"

The rabbit perked up. The sudden noise from Beestream's position caused it to turn on its paws and pelt in the opposite direction.

"Fox-dung!" Stormshade hissed, tearing after it. Chunks of grass and soil flew out behind him as he gave pursuit.

The rabbit wove between reeds, under bushes and across marshes. Stormshade felt the soil give way to mud, and the brown liquid sucked at his paws and slowed his run to a crawl. Beestream flew past him, a yellow streak in against the dark river.

She was going too fast to see what was coming.

An old twoleg fishing-twig, propped against a tree. A reddened hook was attached to a string on its tip.

Stormshade watched as she tore underneath its dangling string.

He watched as the hook caught into her scruff.

He heard her grunt in pain as blood was drawn. Just as quickly as she had run past him, she had collapsed into the mud with a shriek.

"Beestream!" Stormshade yowled. He could feel his heart pounding, pounding so violently that his throat pulsed. He waded through the mud, crouching over her. "Are you okay?" He asked urgently. Red was pooling around her. *So much blood!*

"Stormshade..." Beestream coughed, her torso tensing. "My throat--"

Stormshade wrapped his paws around her shoulders, shifting her away from the fishing-twig.

His heart sank.

What had caused her wound was not a hook, but a large, pointed stone jutting out of the mud. Stormshade choked. A stone seemed to rest in his throat.

"Stormshade!" Hailpaw was sloshing towards his mentor, eyes wide and full of horror. They were welling with tears. "I-I'm s-sorry, s-so sorry--"

"You're fine!" Stormshade snapped. Beestream took in a sharp breath, and Stormshade held her close to him. "Get her on my back!

Please!"

Hailpaw obliged, shoving his shoulder underneath her hindquarters. Stormshade felt raw fear pulsing through his veins. Fear that, in a few moments, he would be in a world without Beestream.

That he could not afford.

Without paying regard to Hailpaw, Stormshade pelted away, ignoring the mud sucking at his paws and the water splashing against his face. He ignored the frigid wind, chilling him to the bone, and paid attention to the sharp grunts of pain from the she-cat on his shoulders.

He opened his jaws to yowl as he burst into WindClan's camp, eyes wild with worry. "Help!" He called. "Mintfur! Help!"

A grey tom hurried from the medicine den. "Take her to my den!"

Stormshade felt his heart thudding in his chest, hammering against his ribs. It intensified as the cats of WindClan formed a ragged circle around him, eyes wide with concern.

Swiftleap padded forward. "Let me help--"

Stormshade shouldered him away, trotting to the medicine den with a scathing look. "Don't hurt her!" He snapped.

The medicine den seemed larger to Stormshade than it normally was. Mintfur crouched over a hole in the ground, clawing soaked moss from its depths. "What happened?"

"She was teaching me to moor run," Stormshade growled, crouching alongside a nest. Painstakingly, he slid her into the moss. "A twoleg left his fishing-twig, which snagged her scruff and tripped her."

Mintfur turned, moving briskly from the herb stockpile to Beestream's nest. He clutched a bundle of moss between his chin and chest, using his forepaws to brush Beestream's blood-soaked fur away from the wound. "So this was near the river?"

"It was muddy," Stormshade went on, struggling to steady his

shaking voice. "She fell on a sharp stone."

"Muddy..." Mintfur sighed to himself. He lifted a paw, snagging wool from where they were piled up against the den wall, and dropped it next to Beestream's flank. Swiftly, he tightened his grip on the moss, squeezing clear water into the wool.

"Will she be okay?" Stormshade worked his paws into the ground. He noticed a dull pain within his jaws, and with a start, realized he had been clenching his teeth.

"She may develop an infection," Mintfur mewed seriously. "The hooks on twoleg fishing-twigs grow red over time." He used a paw to scoop up the soaked wool, and began to clean Beestream's wound. "When they grow red, they do more than just cut. They give diseases." He paused, hissing with frustration. The wool was already stained a dark crimson. "The stone also cut a bad spot. It'll be hard to stop the bleeding. I need cobwebs. Get them."

Stormshade nodded wordlessly, turning on his heels and diving into the herb stores.

Most of them were empty.

The stone that was in his throat seemed to rise higher, and he fought to swallow it. *I'm not going to* cry *in front of Mouseleap's father!* He snapped to himself. He searched hole after empty hole until he found the cobweb, and threw his forepaws inside, shoveling bundles out and practically tossing them at Mintfur's feet.

The medicine cat didn't waste time, gently pressing them against her throat.

"Can't you put any more effort into it?" Stormshade snapped.

"That's the issue," Mintfur replied. There was a hint of familiarity in his voice. He knew what it was like to watch a loved one die. "I can't apply too much pressure to her wound without choking her."

Stormshade gulped. His paws shook. He could hardly stand. "It's... really, *really* bad, isn't it?"

Then

"Ah!" Stormpaw grunted as he felt a bundle of brown fur barrel into his flank, sending him careening into knee-high snow. "Ow!"

"Maybe if you weren't in those tunnels all day, you'd be used to the cold!" Mousepaw purred, tail flicking teasingly.

"Are you joking?" Stormpaw replied defensively. "The tunnels are freezing!"

Mousepaw padded over to him, licking flakes of snow from his ears. "Your fur is a little short for this weather, isn't it?"

Stormpaw felt a tingle of heat in his cheeks, and he flattened his ears self-consciously. "Maybe."

Mousepaw shook out her own pelt, fur bushing against the cold. "Uh-oh." She peered over Stormpaw's shoulder, adding, "Here comes trouble."

Sunclaw was descending the hill, Cloudstar at his flank. Mousepaw immediately scrambled away from Stormpaw, sitting down awkwardly a few tail-lengths away. Cloudstar's eyes narrowed.

"Having fun, you two?" She inquired. Sunclaw snorted.

"It's not time for fun," he growled. "Stormpaw, remember what I told you about posture."

Stormpaw readjusted his position, trying his best to sit more neatly. "...always have your back straight when in the Clan Leader's presence..." he drawled.

Sunclaw lifted a paw, flicking snow from his claws. "Cloudstar and I have a very important lesson planned for you two today," he informed the apprentices. "In leaf-bare, rabbits are difficult to track down. It is more important this season than any other for tunnelers and moor-runners to work together."

"It is also important to not let your personal feelings distract one another from feeding the Clan," Cloudstar chimed in. Her gaze

swept protectively over Mousepaw, flashing with hostility when she glanced at Stormpaw. "You must pay attention to your long-term best interest."

"Stormpaw." Sunclaw padded forward, nosing his apprentice. "Where is the nearest tunnel?"

"T-the snow is blocking--"

Sunclaw growled, scooping snow from the ground and flinging it into Stormpaw's face. Stormpaw gagged, sneezing.

"Is it cold?" The senior warrior barked. "It should be! During a blizzard, you may have to seek shelter in our tunnels. Where are they?!"

"I don't know!" Stormpaw yelped, fur spiking. "The entrances are covered!"

Sunclaw dipped his paw into the snow, threatening to throw another pawful, and then relaxed. "I suppose you're right," He mewed reluctantly. "Do you know where camp is?"

Stormpaw nodded, squinting his eyes against the snow.

"See the moor-hills? There is a tunnel entrance at the base of the third hill from camp, hidden underneath a large stone at its base. You should've memorized this."

Stormpaw sniffed. He wasn't sure if he was about to cry, or sniffing against the cold. "Y-you're right..." He conceded.

"Good luck!" Cloudstar called. "You and Mousepaw will be hunting along the trail towards the lake." Her tone darkened, and she added, "Don't let the she-cat distract you."

Stormpaw glanced over his shoulder, his blue eyes meeting her amber ones. Cloudstar allowed herself to bare the tips of her teeth.

"...I know you toms have trouble with that."

Now

"May all cats old enough to hunt gather below the Tallrock for a Clan meeting!" Goldenstar's announcement was met with a flurry of confused murmurs and twitching ears. It was nearly nighttime.

"I would like to first extend my condolences to my warriors for the unfortunate event involving Beestream." Goldenstar eyed the medicine den. "I trust in Mintfur, however, and I have confidence in his abilities."

Stormshade growled to himself, ears flattening.

"Sheesh." Brambleblaze was eying his denmate, eyes glinting mischievously. "Somebody needs a poppy seed."

Stormshade glared at him. "What??"

"Oh." Brambleblaze blinked. "Beestream. Sorry."

"You should be," Stormshade growled.

"Enough fighting, brothers!" Goldenstar raised his voice. His gaze landed directly upon the squabbling toms, who shrunk away from the golden leader like shameful kits. "A Clanmate is in danger, and Mintfur has a shortage of herbs." He paused, as if he was ensuring the toms would remain silent, before continuing. "I know it is risky, but to save a life, anything is worth the effort. I need somebody to venture into RiverClan territory -- secretly."

A few gasps of surprise emitted from the crowd, but Goldenstar ignored them.

"Mintfur is in need of willow bark, for the pain."

"Surely we should find something else!" Swiftleap called. Stormshade could feel shock pulsing through his body. *You were my friend!*

"He's right," Sunclaw agreed. "You remember the gathering, Goldenstar. We can't risk damaging our reputation further."

Stormshade cleared his throat, climbing to his paws. "I'll go," he growled out. The camp grew silent, save for a hum of approval from

where Goldenstar sat.

"Thank you, Stormshade." Goldenstar gritted his teeth. "We are talking about the very life of a warrior! Who cares about reputation, if we can save her life?"

Tigerstorm nodded in agreement, staring adoringly at his leader.

"Stormshade carried her back to camp single-pawed," Sunclaw argued. "He's tired and sore. He's a tunneler. RiverClan will see him from a forest away."

Stormshade glared at his former mentor. "I will be fine," he snarled back. *You can't control me anymore.* "Goldenstar, I am ready to leave now."

Sunclaw opened his jaws to make a stinging retort, but Goldenstar shot a look. "It's settled!" He declared firmly. "Stormshade will travel to RiverClan and retrieve willow bark. Tigerstorm, join him."

Tigerstorm nodded all-too-quickly and trotted through the throng of cats. Sunclaw refused to tear his stinging gaze from Stormshade, yellow eyes burning.

Stormshade turned to follow his deputy, but he felt a paw tugging at his shoulder.

Brambleblaze blinked at Stormshade, opening his jaws to say something, but he didn't find his words. Instead, he gave a tiny nod of respect.

* * *

The gusts of wind finally calmed as the pair crossed the river. Stormshade's fears and insecurities regarding RiverClan had vanished, as if the river itself washed them away. Only one thing mattered to him now.

"We should get away from the border before a patrol finds us," Tigerstorm hissed. "Goldenstar won't be pleased if we're imprisoned."

Stormshade nodded gravely, padding deeper into RiverClan's interior. The marshland made him sick. Will I be wounded too, just as Beestream was?

Droplets of water splattered against Stormshade's face with every pawstep. He couldn't feel them. He couldn't feel anything but the ache in his clenched jaws.

"Willow trees grow alongside water," Stormshade mewed, voice low.

"For what it's worth," Tigerstorm grumbled, "It looks like a bunch of reeds to me. What a miserable territory RiverClan lives in."

Stormshade took a deep breath. He couldn't stop thinking, thinking of her.

Paws, slipping in mud. Stormshade grunted, squinting into the reeds. "How will we ever find a tree through all this dung?" He snarled with frustration.

The hook, dangling from a string.

Stormshade felt his heart thundering, faster and harder than it ever did previously. He could feel the air seeping from his lungs, no matter how swiftly he breathed.

The rabbit, pelting along the river.

The world was spinning.

Stormshade's legs were weak. *Sunclaw was right. Right about me.*

He was distracted from his worries, however briefly, when a grey flash of fur tackled him, pinning him to the ground.

A black tom wrestled with Tigerstorm for a moment, yelping with pain when the brown tabby sank his teeth into his leg. Stormshade strained against his attacker. "Get off!" He roared.

Tigerstorm growled with desperate anger, and yanked on the black tom's leg, swinging him to the ground with a hiss.

"What are you doing on RiverClan territory?" An authoritative voice snarled. Tigerstorm's eyes widened with dismay. Stormshade strained harder. *I won't let Beestream die!*

"Troutstar!" Tigerstorm stepped away from the black tom's writhing body. His mouth opened and closed nervously, as if he was trying to say something that he couldn't articulate.

"Tigerstorm," Troutstar snarled. "Goldenstar's little kittypet."

"And you," Stormshade's attacker snarled into his ear. Oceaneyes! "Goldenstar's slimy coward."

"We're here for herbs!" Stormshade hissed. "My friend is hurt."

"Then where's Mintfur?" Troutstar's nose wrinkled, and he bared his teeth.

"Where do you think? Taking care of my friend!" Stormshade spat, trying to shake Oceaneyes free, but he couldn't. *What's the point of all this muscle if I can't use it?* He thought bitterly.

Troutstar bent to help the black tom to his paws, eyes pooled with distrust. "I think it's best you stay with us," he growled, "Until I figure out exactly what your leader is planning."

IV

Now

The evening light was beginning to recede, and Stormshade wondered if he'd ever return home.

He was far, far away from RiverClan's camp. On all sides, Stormshade was surrounded by damp, gnarled branches. A silver warrior blocked the den entrance.

"Can't spy on us all the way out here, can you?" Oceaneyes was smirking. "I wonder what secrets Tigerstorm will give."

"Tigerstorm won't talk," Stormshade huffed back. He contorted his face into a nasty scowl, but Oceaneyes only seemed amused.

"I bet he's talking right now."

Stormshade glared at her, throat burning with frustration. *Goldenstar won't leave us,* he reminded himself. He hunched, trying to ignore the biting cold against his damp pelt. *He isn't that kind of cat.* His chest felt tight with anxiety, and a strange feeling pressed up against his sternum. *She can't die. Beestream can't die.*

This den is freezing. He shifted uncomfortably on the pebble floor. The stench of fish wafted through the wall's cracks and into his nose.

Stormshade didn't want it to bother him. *Beestream has it so much worse.*

Oceaneyes was reveling in his suffering. Stormshade could almost see the distrust dripping from her whiskers, as though she fished in a river of hatred.

"Don't look at me like that," Stormshade growled, turning away. He had to avoid her gaze.

"Why?" Oceaneyes smirked, shifting on her paws. The pebbles groaned against each other under her weight. Stormshade struggled to meet her malicious blue eyes.

"Because you think I'm weak," he replied. "But I'm not weak. I'll never be weak."

"I've never seen you be strong," she countered.

"You wouldn't know," Stormshade leapt to his paws, eyes narrowing defensively. "You know nothing about me!"

"He's right," an older tom mewed gruffly. "We should start questioning him."

"Brilliant idea, Timberclaw." *It's the RiverClan deputy.* Oceaneyes stepped aside, allowing the senior warrior to take her place.

"Why are you here?" He began.

"I *told* you!" Stormshade snapped. "My friend Beestream was wounded, and we needed to find painkiller!"

"And so you came to our territory?"

"You're the only Clan with willow bark," Stormshade replied sharply.

Timberclaw waited for a moment. Disbelief was evident in his gaze. "You could've asked," he pointed out. "Our medicine cat would've been happy to help. You know that."

Stormshade wanted to reply, but had no retort. *Why didn't we try that?*

Timberclaw leaned forward. His whiskers gave a mocking twitch. "That's how we know you're lying, rabbit-stench."

"I--"

"How was your friend wounded?" Oceaneyes yawned. *She doesn't expect me to have an answer.*

Stormshade shuddered. "She was caught on a twoleg fishing twig," he mewed.

Oceaneyes blinked. She exchanged a knowing glance with Timberclaw. Stormshade's heart stopped.

"What did you do?" He murmured.

"We didn't do a thing," Oceaneyes replied awkwardly.

Stormshade stood. His fur rose. "What did you do?! What did you *do*?!"

Timberclaw grunted. Oceaneyes met the WindClanner's gaze.

"Nothing," she repeated. "And neither will you."

Stormshade's vision blurred. He felt a tingling sensation in his cheeks, along his chin, pushing up into his forehead. His muscles tightened, and he felt an insatiable urge to hurt something.

Her.

Letting out a ferocious roar, he burst from the den and, with a swipe of his paw, effortlessly flung Timberclaw into the mud. He whipped around, latching his claws into Oceaneyes's fur. Her eyes widened as he bowled her over. She spat a curse into his face, but Stormshade couldn't hear her. A ferocious roaring was in his ears. He felt blood splatter against his chest.

A weight crashed into his side. Stormshade tumbled onto his flank, growling with hatred as Timberclaw sank his jaws into Stormshade's shoulder.

"Get off--!" Stormshade writhed around, catching the RiverClan deputy on the chin. He heaved the brown tom away, staggering to his paws. "*Rah*!"

The bushes rustled as Oceaneyes fled, tail streaming behind her. Timberclaw shook out his pelt, before leaping back onto Stormshade's shoulders, forcing him to the forest floor.

"It won't be long before the Clan comes to kill you," He snarled.

"Let them come," Stormshade snapped back. He twisted his neck, sinking his jaws into Timberclaw's throat, before roughly yanking him back down.

Timberclaw screeched in pain. A mixture of blood and saliva erupted from his jaws as he collapsed onto the forest floor. Stormshade raised his paw to deliver a killing blow.

And then the bushes began to shake. Oceaneyes's scent had returned.

"He's over here!" She was yowling. The thrumming of paws followed her voice.

Stormshade saw the bloodied RiverClan deputy before him, eyes widening. He stumbled away from him. The tingle in his face was beginning to fade away. *I just killed someone.*

Stormshade whirled around, shooting into the forest just as Oceaneyes reentered the clearing. *I just killed someone.*

Stormshade could hear a chorus of outraged yowls and shrieks as he tore away. *I just killed someone.*

Bushes rustled. Birds chirped. Stormshade could only hear the pounding of his own heart, and the same horrible thought over and over again. *I just killed someone.*

He ducked beneath a low-hanging branch, weaving through the reeds. The river gurgled in the distance, and Stormshade felt his heart leap into his throat. *The border!* With a yelp, he threw himself forward, leaping towards the rushing water.

It was harsh and swift. Stormshade felt the surface crash into his chest, before swallowing him whole.

He opened his jaws to cry out, but only took in a mouthful of water. The sunlight was starting to fade.

* * *

Stormshade awoke to find himself in a starry field, beneath four ginormous trees. A grey tom sat nearby, pawing delicately at a tuft of grass.

"Don't worry," he mewed. Stormshade recognised his voice. "You're okay. For now."

The WindClan warrior rose to his shaking paws. "Y-you're my ancestor," he breathed. "You gave me a message before we fought ThunderClan."

The Ancestor dipped his head. "Yes. And now, I must speak with you again."

Stormshade glared at him. "You chose a bad time," he growled out. "I *have* to save my friend!"

"Beestream?"

"Beestream!" Stormshade repeated, eyes wide. "She's dying! I should be out there *helping* her, but instead I'm here!" He stormed towards the StarClan warrior, ears flattened. "Send me back!"

"Soon."

"Now!" Stormshade struggled to keep his voice firm. He knew it sounded like he was on the verge of tears. "*Please.* I-I'm... I'm begging you."

"*Begging*?" The Ancestor repeated. "That must be difficult." The Ancestor gave an amused twitch of his whiskers. "Stormshade, she's not dead yet."

"I hate you," Stormshade hissed back, fur spiking. "Keeping me here when I should be going home!"

"And I love you." The Ancestor replied. "You're important to me. But... I suppose you're right. We're wasting time, and you will be waking soon."

"So this is pointless." Stormshade groaned. His fur prickled impatiently.

"Far from pointless. A time of strife will befall WindClan." There was a moment of silence as The Ancestor turned his eyes towards the gleaming sun. "Storm clouds gather, young warrior. *Your most ancient foe must become your newest ally.*"

* * *

"Come on."

Stormshade felt grass sliding beneath his flank. Jaws were sunken into his scruff, and someone was panting around his fur.

"I said, come on! Get him out of the water!" It was Goldenstar. The WindClan leader's voice was laced with worry. "StarClan--!"

Stormshade opened his eyes, spotting his leader. He opened his jaws, letting out an incomprehensible gurgle.

Goldenstar's breath hitched. He lifted a paw and slammed it into Stormshade's back. With a groan, Stormshade hacked up a mouthful of water.

"Hey!" Stormshade snapped, ears flattening.

Goldenstar's eyes were wide. "Where's Tigerstorm? Is he with you?"

Stormshade blinked at the golden warrior, horror setting in. *Beestream's going to die,* he thought. *Beestream is going to die, and I left the deputy in RiverClan!* The tunneler opened his jaws to apologize.

"I-I--"

Goldenstar hauled Stormshade to his paws, giving his ears a few rough licks. "Calm down. You're tired. Take it slow."

Stormshade took a deep breath, heart hammering. "RiverClan caught us," he mewed breathlessly. "RiverClan caught us! Th-they took Tigerstorm to their camp and brought me to a-a prison. Goldenstar, they--" he broke off, shuddering with anger. "They have something to do with Beestream--"

"What happened? How did you escape, brother?"

"I had to fight. Goldenstar, I think I... I think I killed Timberclaw."

Goldenstar nodded grimly. Stormshade felt him press against his flank, guiding him to the camp.

"You need to rest," he mewed gently. "And we need to prepare."

* * *

"Beestream!" Stormshade bounded across the WindClan camp, straight into the medicine den. "Beestream, are you alright?!"

The yellow she-warrior warily lifted her head, groaning. "Stormshade?" She croaked.

"Where's Mintfur?" Stormshade's brow furrowed. "He should be helping you!"

"You and Tigerstorm didn't return," she wheezed. "He went to find herbs himself. Sunclaw was watching me."

Stormshade curled tightly around her, licking the wound on her neck. Her fur was messy and unkempt.

"Don't lick it," Beestream mewed, flinching. "You'll take off the poultice." She settled against him. She was warm and soft from sleep.

"I'm sorry..." Stormshade mewed. "I could've helped you."

"It is what it is," Beestream replied softly. She closed her eyes, pressing her muzzle into Stormshade's chin. "Stormshade... whatever happens..."

"No." Stormshade cut her off. "Don't talk like that."

"I have to." Beestream's voice cracked, and her breath hitched. "I see dead cats. They're watching me."

Stormshade felt cold. Beestream froze, glancing over Stormshade's

shoulder.

"She's here," she breathed. "Stormshade... I love you."

"I--"

"I love you." Beestream buried her face in his chest, shuddering. "Do you love me?"

Stormshade's chest suddenly felt tight. He was scared. "I--"

"Do you love me?" Beestream pressed tightly against him, panting fearfully. "Please, Stormshade, tell me you love me! Please!"

"Beestream--"

"Promise me!"

Stormshade was scared. Scared of telling her how he felt. He never felt so terrified in his entire life, and he didn't know why. Beestream sobbed.

"...promise me."

She sounded so small.

That made Stormshade even more terrified.

"I..." his words died on his tongue. He couldn't say them.

Heartbeats passed. Her flank rose and fell. She began to grow cold.

"Beestream?" Stormshade whispered. "Are you there?"

Silence. Stormshade's fur pricked. His muscles seemed to seize. His sternum tightened once more.

No.

Stormshade had never yowled so loudly in his life. Throwing his head back, Stormshade let out a furious roar. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

I will kill *them!*

With a snarl, Stormshade left the den. *Sunclaw was supposed to watch her,* he thought. *I'll kill him too.*

His eyes frantically searched the camp. *There.* The light brown tom was laying near the prey-heap.

"Sunclaw!" Stormshade barked. "What are you doing?!"

Sunclaw glanced at his former apprentice awkwardly, but with a hint of condescencion. "You came back empty-pawed," he commented. "I'm not surprised."

"Beestream is *dead*!" Stormshade snarled back.

Sunclaw's face fell. "She... is?"

"You were supposed to watch her, fox-heart!" Stormshade's eyes had narrowed into slits, and he lifted a paw threateningly.

"What are you doing?" Brambleblaze bounded between them. "Stormshade!"

"Out of my way!" Stormshade attempted to shove past the brown tabby, but Brambleblaze pushed back.

"This is your fault!" Brambleblaze growled. "StarClan, Stormshade, if you had only swallowed your pride and let someone else go to RiverClan, maybe we'd have the herbs we needed!" His eyes were watering. Stormshade felt the anger in his throat wane a little. *They trained together, too.* Brambleblaze's eyes shone with fury. "Where is Tigerstorm?"

Stormshade's anger was replaced immediately with remorse. "He..."

"Speak up!"

Stormshade couldn't meet his denmate's gaze. A crowd was beginning to gather.

"You lost Tigerstorm, didn't you?" Brambleblaze's words cut into

Stormshade's pelt like a hawk's talons.

Stormshade shuffled his paws. *I should be dead,* he thought. *I should've done better.*

"StarClan, Stormshade, say something!"

In an instant, Goldenstar was there to speak for him.

"Tigerstorm was captured," the WindClan leader mewed curtly. "This fighting is bringing us nowhere."

"They hurt Beestream," Stormshade added. "They did it!"

"How?"

"They're planting fishing-twigs," Stormshade replied. Brambleblaze was staring at him dubiously.

"How do you know that?"

"I just do! A warrior was interrogating me. I mentioned Beestream and she didn't believe me. But when I mentioned the pole, she had this *look* and all the sudden she acted like I--"

Goldenstar lifted a tail. "We need Tigerstorm," he mewed. "Stormshade, are you telling the truth?"

Stormshade's heart pounded. "I swear. Goldenstar, we *have* to teach them a lesson!"

Goldenstar nodded. "We will. Stormshade, we will march into RiverClan's camp, and I will flay every fish-fur who had the nerve to harm a hair on Beestream's pelt. You have my word."

"No, Goldenstar." Stormshade shook out his pelt. "I will flay them."

Goldenstar tossed his head. "WindClan!" He yowled. "On me!"

The crowd that had gathered exchanged a series of looks. *They think I've got bees in my brain.*

"Galetrot," Goldenstar ordered. "Sunclaw, you too. Gather the

patrols. We meet at the river."

The two warriors raced off. Sunclaw ducked into a tunnel, and then there was silence save for the rustling of the grass and the thrum of marching warriors. The moonlight reflected beautifully off of Goldenstar's starry pelt.

"Is she *really* dead?" Swiftleap hissed, falling in beside Stormshade.

"I don't want to talk about it," Stormshade murmured. His chest burned.

"Incredible what one wound can do to a cat." Swiftleap's eyes were wide.

"How will WindClan ever recover from this?" Claytail piped up, ears pricked. "When word gets out about what happened, the whole lake will hate us."

He earned a glare from Foxrunner. "More than they already do?"

"Enough!" Goldenstar snapped. The entire column grew silent as they crested a hill. "There is no point arguing about what's gone wrong. This is where we are. And we will fix it."

Stormshade blinked, wrinkling his face up. *Stay calm.* The river grew louder, and Swiftleap's face hardened with determination.

"Goldenstar!"

A gasp befell the WindClan warriors. Was that Troutstar's voice?

A vast RiverClan patrol was waiting for them on the other side of the river. Goldenstar raised his tail, and the warriors of WindClan lined up at his flanks.

"What a surprise," Goldenstar mewed calmly. His tail twitched, as if he was fighting to hide his shock. "To find you waiting for us."

"Oceaneyes warned us." Troutstar's gaze flicked towards Stormshade. His eyes glowed in the moonlight. "We've been ready for some time now."

Goldenstar's eyes narrowed. He glanced at his patrol. "Stay here," he whispered. "Let me talk to him." With a sigh, he trotted down the hill, towards the riverbank. He slowed to a halt when his forepaws hit the water. Troutstar mirrored him. Stormshade saw that, though the RiverClan leader was elderly, firm muscles still rippled beneath his pelt.

"We've come for Tigerstorm," Goldenstar mewed. "Give him to us and maybe we won't tell the others about the traps you've been laying in our territory."

"Those belong to twolegs," Troutstar retorted. His ear flicked. "You're going crazy -- just like Cloudstar."

Goldenstar's tail flicked again. He inhaled. "My friends," he mewed. "Whatever problems our Clans may have -- we can always talk about them. But you cannot take a deputy hostage." He blinked, as if suddenly he knew a fight was inescapable. With less conviction, he added, "That is not the way leaders act."

Troutstar's lips twitched. "Listen to yourself," he snarled. "You sent spies to my territory. You lied before the entire lake at the gathering. You shamelessly served Cloudstar in her campaign to destroy the lake! Even now, you lie to your own Clan." His gaze flicked up, towards the hill, and swept across the WindClan warriors. "Do they know that you shed their blood for personal gain?"

"They know their duties," Goldenstar replied. His voice was oddly calm. "They know right from wrong. They know what they must fight for."

Troutstar's ears flicked in acknowledgement. A moment passed. It seemed like an eternity. Then the RiverClan leader spoke.

"Then let us fight."

A heartbeat passed, and Goldenstar didn't flinch. It was as if he didn't understand Troutstar's words. Troutstar took advantage of this, and instantly was upon the WindClan leader. The two toms tumbled into the water with a series of grunts and shrieks.

"Defend Goldenstar!" Swiftleap yowled in rage charged down the hill. He leapt towards the wrestling leaders, only to be intercepted by a large black she-cat.

Stormshade darted into the water, wincing as it lapped at his pelt. He stumbled, losing his paws in the murky waves.

He watched a blur of silver fur dive into the river, and then disappear.

Something brushed against his flank. Teeth sank into his leg. A great force was dragging him downwards.

Stormshade screeched, taking a mouthful of water as he was pulled below the surface. *I can't see!*

He struck out wildly with his paws, but his attacker deftly dodged every swipe, countering with rough cuffs and scratches. Stormshade watched as the grey depths slowly reddened with his blood.

Teeth sank into his scruff. Someone yanked him from the river with a grunt. Stormshade blinked water from his eyes.

"Let go!" He yowled, paws flailing.

"It's me!" Galetrot sounded frustrated. "Reinforcements are here."

Sunclaw slid to a halt beside him. "Yeah. And for StarClan's sake, stay away from the water!"

Stormshade's attacker emerged from the river just then, his eyes a pair of slits. His silver fur was flat against his muscular frame. Galetrot and Stormshade pressed against each other.

"He looks mad," Galetrot growled. Water splattered across his face as a pair of warriors rolled, screeching, along the rivershore.

Stormshade glanced at Galetrot. With a tiny nod, he darted for the RiverClan warrior with a ferocious yowl.

The RiverClanner rounded on him, lifting a paw to strike at Stormshade, but before he could follow through, Galetrot had

appeared on his back, sinking his teeth into the RiverClanner's shoulder. Stormshade joined in, raking his claws along the tom's face, while Galetrot struck at his ears repeatedly with fast paws.

The RiverClanner growled in rage, flopping onto his back and slamming Galetrot into the mud. Galetrot wheezed, the wind knocked out of him.

"My ribs--" he croaked.

The RiverClanner turned towards Stormshade. He raised his voice to be heard over the din of battle.

"You're the one who hurt Timberclaw." He growled.

Stormshade felt a wave of relief. *He's still alive!* He made a grim expression, however, and replied, "I regret not killing him."

"We all have our regrets." The RiverClanner swung a forepaw at Stormshade with a grunt.

Stormshade ducked, countering with a blow to the warrior's forehead, before shoving his shoulders under the RiverClanner's forepaws. *I'll throw him down!*

The silver warrior was onto him. Before Stormshade could react, he rolled off of the WindClan warrior's shoulders, leaping back up to smash his forepaws into his opponent's ribs. Stormshade stumbled, unable to avoid another blow at his shoulder. His leg buckled out from beneath him.

"You're weak," the RiverClanner snarled. He leapt onto Stormshade, pinning him in the mud.

Galetrot stumbled to his paws, eyes glittering with pain. He made for the RiverClanner's flank."Oh, no you don't--"

"Get off!" The RiverClan warrior lifted a paw, swatting Galetrot into the river. Stormshade bunched his muscles, lunging upwards to sink his teeth into the RiverClan warrior's neck.

The RiverClan warrior let out a horrible screech, ripping himself

free and pelting into the woods. Stormshade pulled himself from the mud, fur spiking.

"Galetrot!" *He's going to drown!* He took a deep, ragged breath, scanning the river. Foxrunner tumbled across the ground, in a losing battle against Oceaneyes. Sunclaw was pulling a black she-cat away from a wounded Leopardheart. Troutstar was poised above the water, pinning something down. *Goldenstar!*

Stormshade's chest pounded. "Galetrot! Where are you?!"

"Fine!" The grey tom broke the surface, chest heaving.

Just then, Swiftleap raced into the water, thrusting his shoulder underneath Galetrot's. "I'll pull him ashore!" He sank his jaws into Galetrot's scruff. "Get Goldenstar!"

Stormshade whirled around, sending water flying across the river. Brambleblaze cut into a RiverClan she-cat's flank, driving her away. RiverClan warriors were gathering in the space between Goldenstar and Stormshade.

"They're cutting our patrol in half!" Brambleblaze stumbled, huffing, to Stormshade's side. "We won't be able to help each other!"

Stormshade took a deep, fatigued breath. "Then we need to cut through," he growled.

Four RiverClan warriors lined up across from them. The two tunnelers bunched their muscles.

"Stormshade," Brambleblaze panted, "I know we hate each other, but--"

Stormshade's fur rose. "--but now is the time to act like Clanmates."

A RiverClan warrior sneered. Brambleblaze shot Stormshade a look.

"Together?" He asked.

"Together."

Yowling, the two toms charged into the patrol. Stormshade sliced through a black tom's shoulder, leaving glittering red trails, before a ginger tom caught him behind the ear.

Then a white she-cat leapt onto his back.

Brambleblaze's ears flattened as he attempted to force his way towards Goldenstar, but swift paws shot through the water and pulled him under with a gurgling cry.

Stormshade's eyes widened, and he searched frantically for an escape. He tried to round onto the ginger tom, but the she-cat on his back weighed him down.

Claws swiped across his cheek.

Claws swiped across his other cheek. Stormshade spat blood into some cat's face.

Something was moving in the treeline. For a moment, Stormshade could smell Tigerstorm.

Did he escape?

The world seemed to grow still for a moment, until suddenly the weight disappeared from Stormshade's back. The WindClan deputy, bloodied and bruised, had joined the battle. He rolled into the mud with the she-cat for a moment, before sending her crashing into the ground with one hefty swipe.

"Where's Goldenstar?!" He snapped.

Stormshade dodged a blow from the ginger. "With Troutstar!" He turned to face the black tom with a snarl. The ginger took this chance and leapt over Stormshade's back.

The black tom growled, shoving Stormshade into the mud. Stormshade didn't care. He watched with horror as Tigerstorm was flung to the ground, and as a large paw was brought down onto his head. The world seemed to slow down as Tigerstorm was sent sprawling across the dirt.

Still.

Bloody.

Beaten.

WindClan's second finest warrior, dead in the mud.

A few heartbeats of stillness passed before the world seemed to resume. Stormshade couldn't even yowl out before claws caught his chin, sending him stumbling back.

Brambleblaze was dragging himself out of the water, hind leg dragging uselessly behind him. Claytail, Oceanbreeze, and Rabbitspark were dragging Troutstar away from Goldenstar, who opened his jaws to cry:

"WindClan, retreat!"

* * *

"I'm sorry." Stormshade heard a familiar voice behind him. He turned to see Mouseleap. Her pretty face was contorted with worry. The moonlight caught on her blood, which hadn't yet dried.

"I'll never have anyone like her again," Stormshade croaked back. The medicine den had been crowded since WindClan's defeat. Goldenstar lost a life, and hadn't yet completely woken up.

"Tigerstorm and Beestream all in one day." Mouseleap stared ahead. Her words were followed by silence. Stormshade felt awkward around her, even if he had loved her once.

She rested her tail on his shoulder. "I'll be here if you need me," she mewed softly. Stormshade blinked at her, silent. A few awkward heartbeats passed, and then she whisked her tail away, limping towards the moor-runner's den. Stormshade stood.

"Wait--" he mewed. Mouseleap stopped abruptly, peering over her shoulder.

Stormshade knew what he wanted to say. *Don't leave me alone.* The

words were too pathetic. Too embarrassing. Instead, he mewed, "...thanks."

Mouseleap began to reply, but she was cut off by an excited mew from Leopardheart.

"He's awake!" She cried.

Goldenstar limped out of Mintfur's den.

"I cannot begin to express my condolences," he mewed sadly. "For what I have done. I have killed Tigerstorm. I have failed to avenge Beestream."

There was a pause. Goldenstar was allowing his warriors to gather, to hear his words. Sympathy for the young leader filled the camp.

"I..." Goldenstar grimaced, as if he was holding back tears. "...Tigerstorm was my friend. He was my brother. And the time we spent together was worth more to me than anything in the world."

A murmur of agreement arose from the Clan. Goldenstar took a breath.

"My friends, I have no family. I have no mate. I only have you. No matter what happens, I will always love you. I fight and die in WindClan's name."

Stormshade could almost see his posture improve, his wounds heal in real time. He seemed almost... victorious.

"I will not blame you if you think less of me. I will not blame you if you hate me. Tigerstorm was a better cat than I could ever be."

"It's Stormshade's fault!" Sunclaw called out. "He's the one who incited the attack!"

Stormshade resisted the urge to hang his head. *I can't do that. Not in front of everyone.*

"Stormshade did nothing," Goldenstar mewed automatically. "I am your leader. Everything that happens within our territory is my

responsibility alone. I am prepared to face it." He faltered for a moment, as if he wasn't sure if he believed his own words, and mewed, "Stormshade. I offer you the position of Deputy."

Sunclaw and Stormshade leapt to their paws. "*What?!*" They cried in unison.

"Goldenstar!" Sunclaw snapped. "My former apprentice is reckless and prideful. He *killed* Tigerstorm!"

"I--" Stormshade swallowed a knot in his throat. "Goldenstar, I--"

"What do you have to say, Stormshade?"

Stormshade blinked silently up at the WindClan leader. He truly looked like a StarClan warrior. *He is better than me in every way. I should be exiled.* "I want to..."

Goldenstar shifted, eyes shimmering expectantly.

I should turn it down. Stormshade took a breath. *It's the right thing to do.*

But then he looked around the crowd. He saw the faces of cats who surely hated him. Cats who thought less of him. Swiftleap and Mouseleap, his friends, seemed sympathetic. *They're sorry for me*. Galetrot's face was too bloody to be read. *I couldn't save him.* Sunclaw's nose was wrinkled with outrage. *And* he *thinks I'm a failure.*

Stormshade felt a wave of determination when he met Sunclaw's gaze. He forced his reservations down with a grunt, and steadily mewed, "Goldenstar, I would be happy to serve as your Deputy."

V

Then

"I need you to speak with me, son."

Stormkit awoke to a tom's raspy voice. The gentle howl of wind pushed up against the nursery wall, and Stormkit felt the cold seep into his pelt.

A tongue rasped against his ear. "Before the others wake up," the tom whispered.

Stormkit blinked the sleep from his eyes, soft fur bushing against the cold. "It's early.."

There was a pause. The tom took Stormkit by the scruff, gently lifting him from the den.

Stormkit squeaked, squinting against the harsh dawn sunlight.

"Rushstripe?" Stormkit could hear Goldentooth's warm voice. "Cloudstar wants a word."

"In a moment," the grey tom wheezed. "I need to speak with my son."

"Ah – take all the time. Cloudstar will understand."

Stormkit wriggled. Rushstripe's grip loosened a little bit, before he set Stormkit onto the ground.

"I, uh..." Rushstripe's voice shook. Stormkit turned to look at him. His father's chest was broad, but bony where once there was firm muscle. Permanent lines marked the spaces below his eyes. "This isn't easy for me, son. I just needed to talk to you."

Stormkit rubbed his forepaws into the dust. "Can it be fast? I'm cold."

Rushstripe's shoulders sagged. He sighed, licking Stormkit's forehead. "Sometimes a tom needs to face the cold, son."

Stormkit huffed. He could almost see a knot in Rushstripe's throat.

"You're probably wondering why we don't play anymore. I'm too sick, Stormkit." Rushstripe took a breath, met Stormkit's confused gaze. "Ryethorn says I won't be here for long."

Stormkit blinked. "Are you leaving me?" He whispered.

Rushstripe's shaky breath hitched. He buried his muzzle in Stormkit's fur. "I'm going home, Stormkit."

"Where is your home?" Stormkit felt his eyes grow wet, and a weight seemed to tug at his lower lip.

"*Our* home," Rushstripe replied, placing a shaky paw on Stormkit's chest, "Is *here*. Be a good tom, son. Do what is right, and you'll see me again. I *promise*."

Stormkit shuddered. He turned away from Rushstripe, sniffling. Rushstripe sniffled, too.

"I love you," he mewed. "I know you're too young to understand, but..."

Stormkit could feel his legs grow weak. He settled into the ground, staring at the moor.

"...everything that our family has, is yours now." Stormkit could hear Rushstripe shamble closer, feel his raspy breath on his ears. "Our ancestors look to you. You have the blood of Windstar in your veins."

Stormkit blinked the tears from his eyes. "What will I do without you, father?"

"Be a lion, son." Rushstripe inhaled, exhaled. For the first time in moons, Stormkit couldn't hear him wheeze. "Be a lion."

Now

"I never could live with failure." Stormshade kept his voice low. The cool air of the moor pressed against him, as if, in its own way, it was trying to comfort him. "I don't know why."

"Nobody likes failure," Goldenstar murmured. He stared straight ahead, towards the spot in camp where, just a few moments earlier, Tigerstorm laid.

"It's not the failure," Stormshade felt shame wash over him, and his claws sank into the dirt. "It's what others think of me when I fail."

Goldenstar shifted closer. Stormshade's mind swam. He could think only of Beestream. The way her shoulders rolled when she laughed. How gentle she was to Hailpaw. The glimmer in her eyes when they met his.

"I won't see those things again," Stormshade murmured, mostly to himself. "Never."

"Love is an interesting thing," Goldenstar replied softly. "For toms, it doesn't set in. Not until too much time and distance has built up."

"It wasn't that," Stormshade replied, his voice hardly a whisper. "It's that I was too scared to commit to it. And now she's dead." He paused for a moment, whiskers drooping. "She'll never have anyone to love her. And it's my fault."

"You're a good tom, Stormshade." Goldenstar draped his bushy tail across the new deputy's shoulders. "Tigerstorm would've chosen you, too."

Stormshade looked away. *I only agreed to become deputy because the others were watching.* "I don't know where to go from here."

"That's why I'm here," Goldenstar soothed. His tail gently stroked Stormshade's spine. "To teach you."

There was a moment of silence. Goldenstar glanced at the rising sun. "It's been a long vigil," he murmured. "Get some rest. Swiftleap will take Hailpaw out for you."

Stormshade nodded mutely, trudging for the tunneler's den. He felt sore.

As he settled into his nest, the scent of herbs wafted into his nostrils. Mintfur was there, pressing an ear against Brambleblaze's chest.

"Stormshade." The medicine cat stiffened, drawing away from Brambleblaze. "I just wanted to say... I'm sorry about Beestream. I should've tried harder."

Stormshade stared at him for several heartbeats, his eyes dimming. "You're wrong," he breathed. "*I* should've tried harder."

* * *

Stormshade welcomed the release of sleep. Darkness descended around him, like a wave of dark water, only to reveal four large trees.

This place again. Stormshade worked his claws in the ground. *The Ancestor must be here.* "Leave me alone!" He snarled. "I could've saved Beestream if it weren't for you!"

"Do you really think so?" A cat slid from the bushes, but it wasn't The Ancestor. It was Cloudstar.

Stormshade was taken aback, and he fell onto his haunches. "You're... you're in StarClan?"

Cloudstar gave her chest a few satisfied licks. "Leaders are given special consideration," she explained coolly. "How does it feel?"

"How does *what* feel?" Stormshade narrowed his eyes. His gaze was met with mocking.

"Losing someone." Cloudstar's fur twitched, as though the former leader was struggling to keep it flat. The world seemed to spin around them. The sun vanished in favour of strange, eerie grey light. The four great trees grew wide, until they resembled a giant nursery. Cloudstar padded to Stormshade's side, staring up at the mountainous den.

"In one night, I lost my entire family. Mintfur left my side to become a medicine cat. Three of my kittens died before they could even take their first breaths. And you kept meddling in Mouseleap's life." Her lips twitched, forming a terrifying smile. "I went into that den a mother, and came out... like this."

Stormshade growled. "You were a tyrant," he snarled.

"That's the thing." Cloudstar's nose twitched. "When everything I loved fell through my paws, the Clan blamed *me*. Not the tom who made me pregnant, not the medicine cat who failed to save my kits. *Me*." Her voice lowered. "Maybe you'd understand if you went through it yourself."

Stormshade snarled. "Is that why you're here?" His hackles rose, eyes flashing with outrage. "To tell me how much of a failure I am?"

"I'm here because we have a connection," Cloudstar's anger seemed to melt away in an instant as she broke into a hearty purr. "A deep, emotional one. It makes StarClan's messages more... clear."

Her pelt took on a red hue. A great crimson shadow swept across the plains of StarClan. Stormshade felt his fur prick, and his face tingle with fear. He turned towards the nursery, primal fear washing over him.

Where there was once the great den, stood a giant wave of blood.

It was coming towards them.

Fast.

Cloudstar pressed against Stormshade's flank, inching her muzzle towards his ear.

"Beware," she whispered, "Of the Lion."

And then the wave was upon them. Stormshade felt his fur being torn off by the sheer force of the current as the ground vanished from beneath him. The clouds sped by like fleeing rabbits as the wind grew too loud for the warrior to bear.

He fought to stay afloat, but the blood was too strong. Every kick seemed to send him deeper and deeper beneath the surface.

Beware of the Lion.

Stormshade's jaws parted, and he tried to scream.

* * *

Stormshade jolted awake, panting. The Tunneler's den was dark, and moonlight shone in through the entrance. *For how long was I asleep?* His fur prickled with unease. *The Lion.*

He took a deep breath. His gaze swept the cave entrance, lingering for a moment on every cat. *What did Cloudstar mean?*

There was something sinister about the den. About Stormshade's nest. An amber eye peeped open in the distance.

"Calm down, rabbit-brain." Brambleblaze's let out a frustrated hiss. "You've done nothing but pant and writhe around in that stupid nest."

Heat spread through Stormshade's pelt as he saw Shaleflame's ear twitch in agreement. Swiftleap's tail flicked.

"Maybe ask Mintfur for some poppy seeds," Swiftleap murmured.

Stormshade flushed. "I'm going on a walk." Bowing his head, he hurried from the den, into the cool nighttime air. It washed over him like fresh water, sweeping away the blood that, in StarClan, soaked Stormshade's pelt.

He tasted the air. His nose twitched. The moor-runner's den was nearby. It smelled of heather and wind.

Flicking an ear, the WindClan deputy padded cautiously across the camp, ducking into the moor-runner's den. It was pleasantly cool inside. The wind blew gently through the interwoven branches, softly ruffling the pelts of the warriors inside. Stormshade could see a brown she-warrior coiled up near the den wall, in the darkness. Stormshade stepped towards her, a ball rising in his throat.

His jaws parted. His tongue twitched. He couldn't speak. *I don't want to be a bother.*

Mouseleap stirred. "*Mmmrah*..?"

"Sorry," Stormshade breathed, reddening under his grey fur. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Mouseleap blinked up at him, lifting a paw to rub the grogginess from her face. "It's fine," she whispered. "It's always nice to see you."

Stormshade nodded sheepishly. "Look... I was wondering if..." he trailed off awkwardly, inspecting his paws. "...if I could spend the night with you. I wasn't sleeping well."

Mouseleap yawned, stretching her forepaws. "There's room," she sighed, shifting.

Stormshade flattened his ears, pelt rippling self-consciously as he slowly settled into the nest. Mouseleap closed her eyes, pressing close to him.

"Good night," she whispered.

Stormshade didn't know what to say. He only felt guilty. *What would Beestream think?*

"Thank you," Stormshade murmured softly. "And... good night."

* * *

Stormshade was eased out of his sleep by a gentle tongue rasping along his ear.

"Stormshade," Mouseleap murmured, nudging his shoulder, "You

have to organize patrols."

"*Mrr*?" the young deputy opened his eyes. It took a moment for them to adjust to the brightness. "It's... *darker* in the tunneler's den," he grumbled.

"All the better, right?" Mouseleap tilted her head. "Listen..."

"I know." Stormshade stood, fur twitching uncomfortably. "We're friends. Thanks for letting me share your nest." He could feel his pelt prickle with anticipation. *Beware of the Lion.*

"Did you sleep well?" Mouseleap's brow furrowed with worry.

"Fine," Stormshade mewed swiftly, padding past her. "I need to organize the patrols." *And see Goldenstar.*

Stormshade was hit with a wave of emotion upon exiting the den. The tom could still smell Beestream and Tigerstorm, from their joint vigil two sunrises prior. The early risers of WindClan milled about the camp, awaiting their assignments.

Stormshade's fur flattened. They didn't know he was there.

And then, as if on cue, the wind kicked up, spreading his scent through the camp. Every warrior froze, staring at him curiously.

The moor-runners eyed him with disgust. *They saw me with Mouseleap,* Stormshade realized. He felt a sinking feeling. *One night after Beestream's vigil.*

He knew what he had to do. He imagined Tigerstorm crossing camp, ascending the Tallrock, and puffing his chest. He hadn't earned the right to follow Tigerstorm's path.

It took little effort to climb the Tallrock. The stone was firm and cool beneath his paws. Stormshade's brow furrowed. *I can't fail,* he reminded himself. *I can't. Everyone will think less of me.*

There was only one thing to do: Push forward.

"Good morning." Stormshade took a step forward. His gaze swept

across the assembled warriors. His muscles stiffened with worry. *I hope they don't notice.* The deputy paused, wondering how to begin. *What would Goldenstar say?* Stomshade allowed his greeting to linger for a moment, and then began.

"Our Clan suffered a serious defeat," he admitted. "We lost two of our greatest warriors in just one day. Let us hunt and patrol in their honour."

The warriors below exchanged glances. Was Sunclaw snorting? Brambleblaze was whispering something in his ear. Stormshade suppressed a growl.

"Our strength," he continued, his voice growing louder, "Lies in our brotherhood. Our ability to adapt, and our ability to avenge. Beestream and Tigerstorm *will* get justice, because we will grow stronger."

A murmur of agreement came from Swiftleap, while Willowbreeze gave Shaleflame a doubtful glance.

Beware of the Lion. A shudder prickled its way down Stormshade's spine.

"Thornface," he called, "Take Rushwind, Rabbitspark, and Foxrunner to the ThunderClan border." He tossed his head. "Galetrot, you and Leopardheart will go to the RiverClan border. Keep watch until sunhigh, then come back to rest. We should remain vigilant until our Clans are at peace."

Thornface gave a small, hardly respectful nod, before rallying his patrol and squeezing out of camp. Galetrot flicked his tail and disappeared into the moor-runner's den to fetch his mate.

Stormshade wetted his lips, preparing to organize another patrol. "Rabbitspark, you, Nightbreeze, and Riversong should hunt near the mountains. Our border patrols may scare the rabbits deeper into our territory."

Stormshade paused, thinking. *Am I supposed to assign everyone, or just the cats who are awake?* "Brambleblaze?" He called.

The brown tabby rolled his eyes. "*Yeeesssss*?"

"We'll take our apprentices to the lakeshore to work on scent," Stormshade mewed matter-of-factly. "Wait by the camp entrance. I need to talk to Goldenstar."

Brambleblaze huffed. "Sure thing, Dep."

Stormshade sighed, watching him disappear into the apprentice's den. He whirled around, racing from the tallrock towards Goldenstar's den.

"Stormshade!" The brilliant WindClan leader flicked an ear, stretching luxuriously in his nest. He held the stretch for a moment, his spine popping, before relaxing with a sigh. "I was just about to go hunting. How was your rest?"

"Fine." Stormshade sat near the den wall, shifting uncomfortably. "I had a dream," he added.

"A second one?" Goldenstar paused, licking his mane-like neck fur.

A third. Something told Stormshade not to mention Cloudstar. Goldenstar had been close to her when he was deputy.

"When I escaped RiverClan," Stormshade murmured quietly, "I fell into the river."

"I know." Goldenstar dipped his head. "I'm glad I pulled you out."

"My ancestor met me again," Stormshade continued. "*Your most ancient enemy shall become your newest ally.*"

Goldenstar froze. He tilted his head. "WindClan *does* need allies," he admitted. "We're surrounded by enemies."

"I'm sorry," Stormshade murmured. "I shouldn't have gone after the herbs."

"You did it to save someone you loved," Goldenstar replied automatically. "That's what matters."

Stormshade nodded uneasily, while Goldenstar sat back on his haunches. "I should go," the deputy mewed.

Goldenstar swished his tail. "Of course. I'm sorry for holding you up. I'll think about your dream, okay? Don't worry."

Don't worry. The words sank into Stormshade's pelt, burnt into his mind.

He had to worry – to beware the Lion.

* * *

"StarClan, it took you long enough!" Brambleblaze shook out his pelt. His apprentice, Woolpaw, was leaning lazily against him, while Hailpaw was hopping up and down excitedly.

"You're okay!" He chirped.

Stormshade's heart warmed for a moment, and he nuzzled Hailpaw affectionately. "We're fine," he murmured.

"Were you making dirt or something?" Brambleblaze jerked his muzzle towards the deputy, snickering.

Stormshade was unamused. "You're such a kit."

Brambleblaze lowered a brow. "At least I'm faithful," he replied.

Stormshade froze. "What?"

Brambleblaze chuckled, a dirt-eating grin plastered across his face. "Hailpaw? Woolpaw? Would you guys like to find the deputy and I a nice, high place to work on scenting prey?"

"Race you!" Woolpaw took off immediately, haring into the grass.

"Hey!" Hailpaw groaned, darting after her. Stormshade watched them go, then turned his icy glare onto Brambleblaze.

"Say that again," he growled.

"Whoah. Tough tom. You got me." Brambleblaze snorted, padding

lazily after the apprentices. "Spare me."

"What did you mean by that?"

"I'm just *saying*," Brambleblaze began, "That you just finished Beestream's vigil and the first thing you did was share nests with Mouseleap. It's not a good look."

Stormshade heated. "I was having a nightmare," he mumbled, shifting his paws.

"Like a kit?"

"No, like–" Stormshade growled, tail lashing. "What's your problem, Brambleblaze?"

"My problem?" Brambleblaze paused, jabbing a paw towards Stormshade. "*My* problem is that you only think about yourself, Stormshade."

"That's not true!"

"It totally is!" Brambleblaze's voice rose. "You're so caught up in maintaining your reputation that you hardly notice that nobody likes you!"

His words cut Stormshade like unsheathed claws. The deputy blinked, stepping back, while Brambleblaze continued his assault.

"I don't like you. Sunclaw doesn't like you. Cloudstar didn't like you. Don't you ever stop and say, 'hey, maybe it's me?'"

Stormshade gritted his teeth, fur pricking. He worked his claws into the ground. "Shut up, or–"

"Or what?" Brambleblaze thrusted his muzzle towards Stormshade's. It was so close, the grey tom could smell the tunneler's breath. "You'll claw me? You're the deputy. You won't do anything."

Stormshade's nose twitched. His voice was caught in his throat.

"I don't know." Brambleblaze eased up, leaning back. "It's just... one

night, you're risking your pelt to save Beestream, and then next thing you know you're ditching her for Cloudstar's daughter. I don't know *what* I think of you. Every time I *start* to respect you, at least a little, you screw it up."

"...I..." Stormshade's voice trailed off, dying in his throat. He noticed the dryness plaguing his mouth. "We should catch up," he muttered, tail flicking. "The apprentices will be waiting."

Then

Stormpaw's heart was aflutter with anticipation as he watched Mousekit, freshly groomed, wander into the centre of camp. The whole Clan was watching her.

Cloudstar most of all.

The WindClan leader was poised on the Tallrock, eyes glittering with protective love for her daughter.

"Mousekit," she announced, "From this day forward, you shall be known as Mousepaw. I will be your mentor."

A few awkward glances were cast around the camp. Stormpaw exchanged a glance with Swiftpaw, gritting his teeth.

"Mousepaw!" Beepaw leapt to her paws, beginning the chant, but Cloudstar shot her a scathing look, lifting her paw.

"*Additionally*," she snapped, "I would like to ask the tunnelers of WindClan for a favour."

Goldentooth stood, puffing his chest, while Sunclaw had an expression of pure dread.

"I command you to dig a second apprentices' den, for the toms to live in."

"Why?" Bramblepaw chuckled. "That's–"

"For her own good?" Cloudstar stood, muscles rippling beneath her pelt. She bared her razor-sharp teeth. "Do you have an issue,

Bramblepaw?"

"N-no!" Bramblepaw gave a nervous laugh, returning to his spot. "Not a single issue! Great idea, Cloudstar!"

Stormpaw let out a soft *snnnnrkkkkk* of laughter.

"Shut up," Bramblepaw hissed back, ears flattening.

Mousepaw looked even more embarrassed than Bramblepaw, hunched in the centre of camp. Cloudstar didn't seem to notice. The WindClan leader bounded from the Tallrock, touching her nose to her daughter's forehead. Mousepaw looked away.

"Poor kit," Beepaw murmured, settling down next to Stormpaw. "I can't imagine how humiliating this is for her."

Just as Beepaw finished the sentence, Cloudstar looked up from her daughter. Her hostile gaze met Stormpaw's, and she flashed him a sharp-toothed smile.

Stormpaw gulped.

Cloudstar rested her tail across Mousepaw's shoulders, guiding her towards the apprentices. "Mousepaw, dear," she began, "These are your new denmates. Stormpaw, Swiftpaw, Bramblepaw –" she nodded at the toms, gaze darkening, "--they're *toms.* Don't talk to them until you're older."

Mousepaw sighed, avoiding Stormpaw's gaze. "Yes, mother."

"And this is Beepaw!" Cloudstar's voice brightened immediately. "She's going to be your best friend. *Right*, Beepaw?"

The yellow she-cat nodded emphatically. "Of course, Cloudstar–er–Mousepaw!" She dipped her head friendily. "We'll have lots of fun."

Stormpaw felt sympathy well up deep within his chest. Cloudstar stepped between her and the male apprentices, tail flicking protectively. "Go." Her eyes narrowed.

Stormpaw stiffened. Bramblepaw tilted his head. "Go *what*?"

"You're tunnelers, aren't you?" Cloudstar's eyes narrowed, and her lips drew back in a snarl. "Start digging."

Now

"I smell... pine." Woolpaw's nose twitched. Brambleblaze purred.

"Pine!" He remarked.

Stormshade glanced at Hailpaw. "How far away would that be?"

Hailpaw looked thoughtful. "I mean... ShadowClan?"

Woolpaw grinned. "That's far!"

"You have an excellent sense of smell, Woolpaw." Brambleblaze commented, tail flicking with pride. "Imagine you're in the tunnels. How would you tell a ShadowClan warrior apart from a WindClan warrior?"

Woolpaw blinked. "I've never heard one before," she admitted.

"You can guess," Stormshade reminded her. "ThunderClan cats are stealthy, but large, right?"

"A ShadowClanner would be lighter on his feet?" Hailpaw's tail twitched.

"Well done!" The lesson was interrupted by the entry of a golden tom, trotting up the hillside.

"Th-thank you, Goldenstar!" Hailpaw's eyes grew wide. "B-but it was Woolpaw who caught the scent."

"You're both very smart cats," Goldenstar replied warmly. "At this rate, you'll be the best warriors in WindClan! I've already thought of your names."

"You *have*?" Woolpaw shook with excitement. "What's *my* name?"

"A leader's secret," Goldenstar sniffed. "I can't tell you."

"Aw." Woolpaw's tail twitched downwards, and she flopped down

into the grass.

"What brings you out here, Goldenstar?" Brambleblaze dipped his head respectfully.

"Foreign policy," Goldenstar replied. "Stormshade, may I speak with you?"

"Can I come?" Hailpaw barged between the two toms, fur bushing. "I won't tell anyone!"

"I'd love to let you come," Goldenstar sighed, "But I need you to make sure Brambleblaze doesn't do something stupid."

"*I'm* not even sure if that's possible!" Brambleblaze cracked.

Goldenstar chuckled, pressing against Stormshade and steering him downhill.

"I think I figured it out," he whispered. "You and I are going to ShadowClan. Right now."

"Now?" Stormshade hissed.

"Yes." Goldenstar's answer came without hesitation. "Brambleblaze?"

"Yes, Goldenstar?" The brown tabby straightened.

"You're with Hailpaw."

"Of course." Stormshade saw frustration flash in the warrior's eyes, but he wouldn't dare question his leader. "Have fun, *Stormshade*."

Stormshade glanced apologetically at Hailpaw. "We'll have fun when I come back, okay?"

The grey apprentice frowned. "Okay." His whiskers drooped, and Stormshade felt a pang in his heart. *Beestream cared more about him than I do,* he recalled. *Now she's gone, and he's only got me.*

"I–" Stormshade's throat was dry. "--I'm sorry, Hailpaw."

The tabby apprentice nodded wordlessly.

Goldenstar nipped Stormshade's ear. "No time to waste!" He was clearly excited. "I've got a plan."

The two toms trotted through the hills, towards ThunderClan's ominous forest. Goldenstar's tail was flicking anxiously. "As long as we're within two tail-lengths of the lakeshore, we'll be fine."

"Of course." Stormshade knew about that rule. It was made when Firestar was still alive. Who would interrupt a diplomatic mission?

"There's one thing we must keep in mind." Goldenstar lowered his voice, as if he feared someone overhearing him. "SkyClan."

"What about SkyClan?" Stormshade couldn't hide the confusion from his voice.

"Ever since they returned, there hasn't been a single fair war on the lake. Five Clans – it's uneven." His brow furrowed with worry. "If Brackenstar or Troutstar turn SkyClan against us, then WindClan will lose. It won't matter if we befriend ShadowClan or not, you know?"

"Hm." Stormshade looked away, thinking. The soft grass passed by as they continued on their trek. "Perhaps we should befriend SkyClan first," he mewed.

"My thoughts exactly." Goldenstar purred. "If we can pull *that* off, we'll rule the lake."

Stormshade gave him a dubious look. "I thought you wanted unity," he mewed.

"We're making *friends*, Stormshade." Goldenstar slowed his pace to lick his chest. "I mean to say that we'll live free from fear. From violence."

There was nothing objectionable about that. Stormshade veered away from his leader, towards the lakeshore. His pace slowed when he caught the scent of RiverClan.

"Goldenstar!" He hissed. "A patrol."

The yellow tom didn't falter. "They're on the lakeshore," he mewed. "They're passing through." He started down the hill, tail high. Stormshade followed, sliding less confidently towards the water.

The patrol, two RiverClan warriors, slowed when they caught sight of the WindClanners. A black tom narrowed his eyes.

"Shalepelt." Goldenstar dipped his head. "You've grown since the last gathering."

The black tom snorted, exchanging looks with a cream-coloured she-cat at his flank. "Look at that, Pebblepool. The WindClanners want to negotiate again."

"We just wanted to say hi," Goldenstar replied cheerily. "Although, we are open to peace. Aren't we, Stormshade?"

"Of course..." Stormshade worked his claws into the ground, fur pricking awkwardly.

"Of course," Goldenstar repeated. "Are you headed towards ThunderClan?"

Shalepelt growled. "Spying again?"

"*Guessing*," Goldenstar corrected, voice cooling. His tail flicked. "Stormshade and I were just headed towards the forest ourselves. Perhaps we can walk together."

Stormshade blinked, stepping forward. "Goldenstar–"

"No." Shalepelt's companion, Pebblepool, flattened her ears. "We aren't stupid."

"And neither am I," Goldenstar replied. "You're forging an alliance with ThunderClan. What would they think if I told them you kidnapped two of my warriors?"

"You crossed our border," Shalepelt snarled, eyes glimmering with outrage.

"To fetch herbs for a dying cat. She needed them desperately,

Shalepelt, and now she's dead. StarClan, you didn't even send us a message! That's not very friendly."

"You–you–"

"We acted out of desperation," Goldenstar admitted, "and you acted out of hostility."

Shalepelt's chest was heaving now, and his mouth frothed with anger. "You WindClan cats–" he bared his teeth, "--you've always been weak and slippery."

"And you've always been fat and lazy. RiverClan has a record of inaction. First Tigerstar, then Darktail, then–"

Shalepelt unsheathed his claws. Goldenstar stepped closer. He looked bored.

"Are you going to claw me on my own territory?"

"I might," Shalepelt hissed.

Goldenstar inched closer. His muzzle brushed Shalepelt's shaking cheek.

"You won't," he hissed. "I'd flay you."

"Listen–"

"*You* listen," Goldenstar snapped. "I am the only thing standing between you and your new friends. It is by *my* grace that you haven't been chased all the way back to your stinking camp!" Eyes narrowing, he snarled, "Go. Run to Brackenstar. I won't stop you."

Shalepelt's hackles rose, and his jaws opened in a threatening hiss, but Pebblepool nipped his tail.

"Let's *go*, Shalepelt," she snapped. "Our time is worth more than this."

"You're right." Shalepelt's jaws closed, and his throat moved for a moment, before he spat directly in Goldenstar's face. "That's for you,

heather-stench."

"You must feel powerful," Goldenstar replied coolly, lifting a paw to dab at his face.

"Come *on*!" Pebblepool tugged at Shalepelt's scruff, dragging him towards ThunderClan territory. Stormshade watched them go, pelt twitching with awe. *What just happened?* He had never seen Goldenstar so hostile.

"We showed them," the WindClan leader growled.

"What were you doing?" Stormshade narrowed his eyes. "That was incredibly stupid!"

Goldenstar shrugged, padding towards the forest once more. "Shalepelt's always hated anything other than RiverClan. His opinion of us can't possibly get any worse anyway."

"But Pebblepool–"

"It's okay, Stormshade." Goldenstar was all too quick to cut his deputy off. "I promise. It's not easy being a leader... but I know what I'm doing." His voice grew firm near the end of the sentence.

That's not Goldenstar. Stormshade pressed after the golden warrior, pelt ruffling awkwardly. "I'm just saying..."

"I don't know." Goldenstar soundeed equally uncomfortable. As they passed into the woods, he flinched away from the shadows. "It's just... ThunderClan... I feel like none of our troubles would exist if only ThunderClan wasn't here. Perhaps Cloudstar was right, in some stupid sense."

Stormshade trotted up to his leader's side, gaze wide with worry. "How so?"

"ThunderClan sabotaged the gathering, Stormshade." Goldenstar sounded bitter. "They attacked us, then made us the villains for it. Now the entire lake is gathering against us. RiverClan doesn't trust us because of Brackenstar's influence."

"But that's because Cloudstar tried to flood their territory, remember?"

"Hmph." Goldenstar shrugged as they skirted a fallen tree. "Cloudstar. What a character, eh?" He nudged Stormshade playfully, as if he was attempting to lighten the mood, but Stormshade couldn't get the image of Goldenstar's bored, cold face from his mind. *Are you going to claw me in my own territory?* The words floated freely through the grey warrior's thoughts. When had Goldenstar become so violent?

* * *

"Goldenstar! What a pleasant surprise." Thornstar's voice held a surprising amount of warmth. The warriors of ShadowClan ringed the camp, eyes round with curiosity as the WindClan patrol was escorted into its centre. A sleek black tom was eying Stormshade warily.

"The pleasure is mine, my friend." Goldenstar dipped his head politely, touching the ground with his nose. He prodded Stormshade, motioning for him to do the same. "*This isn't our camp,*" he whispered.

Stormshade followed suit, and he heard pawsteps approaching. "You look beat," Thornstar murmured. "Were you in a fight?"

Goldenstar looked up, meeting Thornstar's gaze. "That, my friend, is what I am here to discuss."

While the two leaders wandered towards Thornstar's den, the black tom cleared his throat.

"I'm Nightshade," he muttered. His eyes flitted from Stormshade's paws to his ears. "The deputy."

"I've seen you at gatherings," Stormshade mewed. He dipped his head. "I'm Stormshade. Also the deputy."

"What happened to Tigerstorm?" Nightshade blinked, surprised.

Stormshade's ears flicked. He glanced at Goldenstar, seeking

guidance, but only saw his golden tail disappearing in Thornstar's den. *I'm on my own.* Stormshade sighed. *I guess I'll win him over myself.*

"He died," Stormshade explained. "Bravely. He risked his life to save mine, and Galetrot's."

Nightshade nodded respectfully. "I'm sorry to hear that. I spoke to him at the gatherings, when all the deputies gathered. He was easily the most respectful one there." Eyes flashing wistfully, he added, "And he loved Goldenstar. I'm not surprised to hear that he gave his life for his Clan." The black tom's voice grew more quiet and hesitant as he continued, as if he wasn't used to being so emotional with a foreign warrior. "Who were you fighting?"

"RiverClan." Stormshade allowed his gaze to darken. "We caught them laying traps along our border. They killed one of my Clanmates. I–" He broke off, unable to finish his sentence. His ears burnt with shame. *I'm using Beestream's death to manipulate someone*, he thought. A horrible weight seemed to descend onto his shoulders. *What would she think?*

Nightshade's eyes widened nonetheless. "That's horrible!"

Stormshade nodded slowly, looking away. "Yeah... they, um... they want to hurt WindClan, Nightshade. But to do that, they need more power." He paused, trying to rid himself of the thought of Beestream. *I'm so sorry, my love.* "Do you think they'd give that power up once we're taken care of?"

Nightshade grimaced, resting on his haunches. "I suppose not," he admitted. "RiverClan could be a serious threat."

Stormshade nodded encouragingly. ShadowClan would make an easier ally than he thought. *Maybe this is what Beestream wants.* His chest burnt with determination. *To be avenged.* "They're on your border, Nightshade." His voice lowered, taking on a serious tone. "We're worried that they'll hunt in your marshes. Starve you out."

The black ShadowClan deputy shifted uncomfortably, muzzle twitching in acknowledgement. "I understand." His voice was thick

with worry. "Thornstar will, too."

Stormshade nodded, pride replacing the determination in his chest. "Goldenstar could convince anyone of anything," he agreed. "*Anything*."

VI

Then

Dawn.

Stormpaw forced himself to avoid shuddering as he followed Sunclaw's large paw prints. It hadn't stopped snowing for many days, and WindClan was suffering.

A grey tom looked over his shoulder, meeting Stormpaw's gaze. A dusting of snow covered him from ears to tail-tip. "Hurry, Stormpaw!" His bark cut through the air like unsheathed claws. "We're all going to *starve* to death at this rate!"

Stormpaw grunted in frustration, plodding after the warrior. "Coming, Sunclaw!"

Sunclaw snorted, eyes sparkling with impatience. "Our mission is easy," he mewed, voice rough. Blinking the snow from his eyes, he continued, "All we need to do is dig out the tunnel entrances so the others can hunt."

Stormpaw blinked. The wind blasted into his face, forcing him to flatten his ears. Clouds of snow blew over the rolling hills, obscuring his view. "*Easy*?" He mewed incredulously.

Sunclaw grimaced. He dipped a paw into the snow, scraping at it. "Did your father tell you about Shattered Ice?"

"Yes."

"WindClan had *nothing* when Shattered Ice was alive," Sunclaw meowed. He paused, screwing his eyes shut as a cloud of snow flew past. "And he started the tunnels from scratch. You have a mentor and a whole network of tunnels to help you." His voice lowered with anger as he went on. "Your father didn't mention that because he was soft."

Stormpaw started. *Rushstripe was soft?* "What?"

"He had no self-discipline, and jeopardized our Clan because of it." Sunclaw sniffed. "He deserved to get sick."

Stormpaw gaped at his mentor, whiskers drooping. His breath shuddered. The snow continued to swirl around them. "Wh-wha–?"

Sunclaw glared back at his apprentice. "Sorry, did I offend you? In your life, Stormpaw, you can choose between the right thing and feeling good. Rushstripe chose to feel good. End of story."

He turned on his paws, trudging through the snow with flattened ears. Stormpaw felt his heart pounding in his chest. *Was Rushstripe a bad cat?* He shuddered, and it wasn't because of the winter cold. *Is Sunclaw trying to turn me against him?* Stormpaw followed his mentor, tentatively placing one paw after the other as the snowfall grew thicker.

Now

"What was it like?" Mouseleap and Stormshade sat on a hillside, watching the sun rise. They were two tail-lengths apart. "Having a parent who was... *close* to you?"

Stormshade shifted. He tried to keep a knot from building in his throat. "It was like having the best mentor in the world," he replied. "But... I didn't know him for long." He stopped speaking for a moment, allowing the wind to break the silence. It blew his words away, scattering them into the moor. The grey tom could feel weight vanishing from his shoulders. "He died before you were born."

The silence returned again. Stormshade imagined Mouseleap was

mulling over his words, but the she-cat stared ahead blankly. He turned to look at her.

"Mouseleap?"

She flicked an ear. Her brown face was now orange, aflame with sunlight. "I'm thinking," she murmured. "About everything."

Stormshade nodded wordlessly. Blades of grass trailed along his flanks as they waved softly in the morning breeze. "Sorry," he murmured.

"Mm." Mouseleap settled into the ground, blinking. "I just wonder how things would've turned out," she sighed. "My mother didn't like you, and I–" she choked. "--I *loved* you. But I loved her, too. And I didn't know what to *do*–"

"It's not your fault," Stormshade mewed firmly. "It's over."

"--I'm sorry for hurting you," Mouseleap mewed at last. "And making you help me with Cloudstar. And–"

Stormshade felt hot with embarrassment. "I'm not your responsibility," he replied firmly. "You did nothing wrong. I just–"

"Just what?"

"I..." the tom stood, licking his chest. "I'm not sure if I should be talking to you," he mewed. "Beestream just died. W-we would've been mates if only I had told her how I felt, but I didn't." His whiskers quivered. "And now she's probably watching me with you. It's not *right*."

Mouseleap's head drooped. "I understand," she murmured. "I understand."

Stormshade couldn't help but feel guilty for the poor she-cat in front of him. His ears flattened shamefully, tingling with heat. "I'm sorry," he mewed. He stepped towards her, pressing his muzzle into her shoulder. "I... care about you. Thanks for watching the sunrise with me."

Mouseleap relaxed against him, but he could tell her mind was on something else. "Yeah.." she murmured.

Stormshade withdrew, turning away from the sunrise. Mouseleap said no more, and the only sound in the moor was that of the rustling grass and the howling wind.

* * *

Stormshade was surprised to catch the scent of his apprentice. Hailpaw had been through here.

Someone else was with him.

Sunclaw. Stormshade felt frustration well up in his stomach. *Can't he ever leave me to my own affairs?* The grey warrior followed his former mentor's trail, ears swiveling backwards. His tail flicked with annoyance.

"It's a simple question." Stormshade froze when he heard Sunclaw's voice, dropping to his stomach. "What do you think of him?"

Stormshade crept through the grass, trying his best to stalk like a moor-runner. *How do they do it?* Ahead, Hailpaw hummed, as if he was thinking.

"He's like my father," Hailpaw mewed. "But... he isn't around much."

Stormshade tried to keep himself from calling out to his apprentice right then and there. He ducked under a heather bush, watching the two cats through slitted eyes. Sunclaw clicked his tongue.

"That would make sense," he mewed. "Stormshade's own father wasn't quite the best cat."

"He wasn't?"

"No." Sunclaw's reply was matter-of-fact. "And I fear he might have passed that on to your mentor–."

Stormshade pressed himself to the ground, straining to hear. He stalked closer as Sunclaw continued.

"--because–"

Snap!

Stormshade cringed when he felt his paw crush a twig. Warrior and apprentice froze. Sunclaw's face wrinkled.

"I smell you," he snarled.

I've already been caught, Stormshade realized. He stood, eyes narrowed, and snarled back. "What do you think you're doing?" He hissed.

Sunclaw's tail flicked. "You've been neglecting your apprentice," his voice was as hard as flint.

"Goldenstar had important business." Stormshade stepped out from the bushes, storming towards his former mentor. "I *had* to."

"Then maybe he shouldn't have chosen a cat with an apprentice," Sunclaw replied. "Or someone so inexperienced."

Stormshade stopped, his muzzle hair-lengths from Sunclaw's. "I don't care who Goldenstar should've chosen," he snapped. "I don't appreciate you trying to turn my apprentice against me."

Sunclaw smirked back. "Yeah?" Stormshade growled, his claws unsheathing, but Brambleblaze's words suddenly appeared in his mind.

You're the deputy. You won't do anything.

Stormshade took a deep breath. His claws retracted, and he looked straight into Sunclaw's yellow eyes.

"Listen," he growled out. "If I see you so much as *breathe* on Hailpaw again, I will line my nest with your pelt."

Sunclaw nodded, huffing. He shot Hailpaw a look. "See?"

Hailpaw looked uncomfortable. Stormshade's muscles tensed. *Everything is going wrong.* "Get out of here, Sunclaw."

"As you wish, my deputy." Sunclaw sauntered around Stormshade, making sure to brush his claws against his forepaw. Stormshade resisted the urge to wince.

Once he had gone, he turned to his apprentice, eyes wide. "What did he tell you?"

"Nothing much," Hailpaw mumbled, ears flattening. "I promise."

Stormshade's heart pounded. *Not you, too*. He pressed his muzzle into his apprentice's forehead, voice softening. "Sunclaw is bad news," he explained. "He was my mentor. He hurt me. Everyone I looked up to, he made me hate." Pulling away, he looked into Hailpaw's blue eyes and added, "Don't listen to a word he says."

Hailpaw nodded weakly. "Sorry.."

"D-don't be." Stormshade realized that he had never been this tender with his apprentice, and he recalled Hailpaw's words from a few moments earlier. *Does he really see me as his father?* "You're fine. We're fine."

Hailpaw didn't seem so sure.

Then

Stormshade was broken from his dreams by the sensation of a paw roughly prodding his shoulder. Beestream's scent wafted into his nose.

"*Wha*...? Beestream, what are you doing?"

The yellow tabby's eyes were round with worry. "I need you outside camp," she hissed.

"Why?"

"I found someone," she whispered back. "A kit. I think someone left him here."

Stormshade rolled over, lifting a paw to rub at his face. "StarClan, a kit?"

"He won't say a word to me." Her mew was urgent. "He's crying for his father, Stormshade, and I thought–"

"It's fine." Stormshade yawned, face wrinkling as he attempted to wake himself up. He stood, stretching quickly. "Where is he?"

"Just outside," Beestream whispered. Her eyes reflected the moonlight. "He's near the tunnels."

Stormshade blinked. "That close?" He trotted away, skirting awkwardly around a sleeping Tigerstorm.

Beestream nodded, following him into the centre of camp. Her yellow pelt glowed in the moonlight as she slipped through the den entrance, into the moor. "I'm sorry," she was whispering.

Stormshade shook out his pelt, trotting after her. The wind buffetted his fur as they crested a hill, descending onto the tunnel entrances. A small scrap of fur was huddled up in a dip in the ground, wailing.

"I couldn't calm him down," Beestream whispered sadly, pressing against him. "He's calling for his–"

"Dadda!" The kitten shuddered, mouth wide as he cried into the nighttime sky.

"--I-I thought you could help," she murmured. Stormshade looked at the kit. It was a grey tabby tom. "You're... you're a tom, and you look like him. I thought you..."

Stormshade knew what she meant. He pulled away from her flank, padding cautiously towards the kit. His fur ruffled self-consciously. The kit sniffled.

"Dadda?" The tom-kit snorted, his nose running from all the crying. He poked his nose out from his nest, his blue eyes red with tears.

Stormshade couldn't speak for a few moments. Tentatively, he whispered, "I'm here."

The kit sniffled, stumbling towards Stormshade with a whimper.

"Cold," he mewed.

Stormshade felt the kit worm his way between his forelegs and settle beneath him. He turned to meet Beestream's emotional gaze, and nodded.

"Hailkit."

Beestream tilted her head.

"We're taking him with us."

With that, Stormshade took his scruff in his jaws. Hailkit squeaked, squirming, and Stormshade trotted back towards camp with his tail in the air. Beestream followed suit, brow furrowed.

"Should we really be just marching in like this–?"

"We're fine," Stormshade replied, his mew muffled.

As he entered camp, he suddenly felt a wave of dread. Something was off. Two amber eyes were watching him from the leader's den. *Cloudstar*.

The WindClan leader slunk from her den, fur spiked. "What do you think you're doing?" She hissed.

"We found a kit." Beestream stepped up while Stormshade tucked Hailkit between his forepaws. "He would've died if we left him out there."

"He could be a trap from ThunderClan," Cloudstar's teeth were bared, while Beestream and Stormshade exchanged an awkward glance. *What?*

"That's ridiculous," Stormshade snapped back, wrapping one forepaw around the kitten. "He smells like the Horseplace. He's a rogue."

Cloudstar stepped forward, giving Hailkit a tentative sniff. "I lose mine..." she whispered, "... and he gets some handed right to him."

Stormshade felt unease flash through his pelt at her words. *Don't hurt him.* He stepped forward, driving her back a little. "Can he stay?"

Cloudstar met his gaze, lips peeling back slightly. "Oh, of course. Who would I be to deny someone their kit?"

Now

Stormshade wanted nothing more than to sleep, but he knew that he couldn't. Not without someone to share his nest with him.

Beestream. He rolled onto his stomach, staring at the den entrance. Moonlight was seeping in. *Why couldn't you have stayed?*

A bundle of poppy seeds sat in front of his muzzle. Mintfur had given them to him, but Stormshade was reluctant to take them. *I should be able to just... sleep.* Such a simple action seemed terrifying. *What if Cloudstar comes to me again?*

There was a heartbeat of silence, before Swiftleap poked his head into the den.

"What are you doing?" His forehead was wrinkled with confusion.

"I'm trying to sleep," Stormshade replied groggily.

"You shouldn't," Swiftleap mewed. "It's time for the gathering, and you're the deputy."

Stormshade scrambled upwards, eyes widening. "Oh!"

Swiftleap blinked at him, standing aside to make room. "You should really have known," he mewed.

"I know, I know." He shook out his pelt, blinking. "I've been having a rough time."

"Everyone has," Swiftleap replied dryly, steering him from the den. "But this is really important. Goldenstar looks excited."

Stormshade sighed. He blinked some more, lifting a paw to rub at

his eyes. "Right, right."

Aboveground, the warriors were assembled. Mouseleap was giving him an odd look.

Hailpaw trotted up to him. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Stormshade replied gruffly. "Did Sunclaw speak to you?"

"No!" Hailpaw's voice was suddenly defensive. He shot a look towards Sunclaw. The senior warrior was standing next to Goldenstar, eyeing him with slitted eyes. Stormshade suppressed a growl, stepping between him and his apprentice.

"We're going to the gathering," he sniffed. "Stay with the other apprentices."

"On me, WindClan!" Goldenstar lifted his chin, leaping from the tallrock with a flick of his tail. The rest of the Clan fell in behind him, eyes shining with excitement. ShadowClan was behind them now.

All that remained was SkyClan.

Stormshade nodded at his apprentice, catching Swiftleap's eye. "Make sure he's safe," he told his denmate.

Swiftleap nodded, dipping his head. Satisfied, Stormshade trotted ahead, pulling up beside his leader.

"What's the plan, Goldenstar?" His heart was thumping in his chest. "What do I do?"

"You sit down beneath the Greak Oak," Goldenstar replied simply. "With the other deputies."

Stormshade felt uneasy as the hills rose and fell beneath them. The marshes and reeds of RiverClan territory were growing nearer.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Goldenstar sounded almost nostalgic. "You can see everything from here. Our Clan is the greatest."

Just then, Sunclaw fell in beside them. "Very much so, Goldenstar."

The WindClan leader blinked at the senior warrior, nodding in agreement. Then his gaze shifted to his deputy. "What's wrong, Stormshade?"

Stormshade was glowering at Sunclaw, tail flicking. "Nothing," he sniffed.

"Well," Sunclaw mewed, "If anything is wrong, you know I can step in." He cleared his throat awkwardly. Stormshade felt outrage rising in his throat. *I know what you're doing,* he thought.

Goldenstar hummed, something suddenly on his mind, as they crossed the border into RiverClan territory. The pelts of the WindClan warriors were mottled, striped with shadows, as they turned onto the tree-bridge.

The scents of the other four Clans were upon them. Goldenstar lifted his tail, slowing his trot to a slow, confident pad. "Slow," he murmured. "Let them all see us."

A beat of silence fell upon the assembled Clans as Goldenstar lead his warriors onto the island, quickly followed by a collection of hisses and jeers from RiverClan. Stormshade followed his golden leader to the great oak, watching as he leapt into its branches.

"Crazy to think that someday we'll be up there," Nightshade murmured, eyes wide.

Dapplefur snorted. "I *hope* not."

"So." Timberclaw's voice was gravelly and cracked. The fur around his throat was patched and thin. *It's still growing back*. "*You're* the cat that fool chose?"

"Is that a problem?" Stormshade met his gaze, eyes slitted. "Shall I resign?"

"You have no idea." Timberclaw winced, as if speaking was painful.

Fallowstep, the SkyClan deputy, stepped between them. "Our

quarrels are for the *leaders* to settle," he mewed firmly.

"I think he's *saying*," Dapplefur cut in, "That there are candidates he would've preferred." Her gaze swept over the WindClan cats. "I could agree."

Stormshade opened his jaws to defend himself, but there was a yowl from the Great Oak.

"Let us begin our Clan meeting!" Goldenstar's voice engulfed the entire island, which gradually fell silent. Then, the younger leader stepped back, nodding at Brackenstar and Troutstar.

Troutstar was the first to step forward. "Let's skip the formalities," he growled. "A few quarter-moons ago, my warriors caught two WindClan warriors trespassing on our territory." He paused to shoot a glare in Goldenstar's direction. "One of these two warriors was Tigerstorm, the WindClan deputy himself. We held them prisoner, rightfully so, only to find that one of them escaped after an attempt on Timberclaw's life." His icy gaze shifted from Goldenstar, coming to a rest on Stormshade. The WindClan deputy could feel the entire island start to stare, and he fought the urge to fluff up his fur. *I'm not scared of you.* Troutstar wasn't finished speaking, however. "After escaping, he returned with a battle patrol which attempted to invade our territory. We repulsed them easily. RiverClan will never tolerate aggression."

Now it was Goldenstar's turn to speak. He cleared his throat, stepping up next to Troutstar. "Thank you, my friend, for telling the Clans of our dispute. I had planned to do the same." He blinked at the RiverClan with false gratefulness in his eyes. "I find it funny, however, that you left out some very important details." He pulled his gaze from Troutstar, meeting the warriors of the lake. "My fellow warriors, RiverClan has been scheming against us for a long time. We found traps being laid along our side of the border – traps which mortally wounded one of my cats."

A gasp of surprise rippled across the island. The mingling warriors separated from their RiverClan counterparts, shooting looks. Goldenstar's eyes flashed with satisfaction.

"The truth is," he continued, "I did not wish to start a dispute. So, I sent my warriors in secret to fetch the herbs we needed to save a life. They were taken prisoner, and Stormshade wounded your deputy only in self-defense. My 'attack patrol' was merely an envoy sent to negotiate for Tigerstorm's release, but RiverClan had a patrol of its own waiting for us. Why? Because they wanted a fight."

Troutstar's tail lashed. "That's simply ridiculous–"

"*And*!" Goldenstar interjected. "I distinctly recall marching ahead of my warriors to have a dialogue. You antagonized us, correct? You said – and I quote – 'let us fight.'"

Troutsar's voice was now a low growl. "You're lucky that we're under a truce, you smug–"

"There it is," Goldenstar cut him off. "The hostility." He sighed, as if reluctant to continue speaking. "What I am about to tell you will be harmful for the image of my Clan, but it is true. During our battle, Troutstar held be beneath the surface of the water for several, several heartbeats. He held me there until I drowned. I have lost my first life to a violation of the warrior code."

An even greater gasp befell the island, and Goldenstar lowered his head shamefully.

"If that wasn't enough, Tigerstorm had managed to escape RiverClan's camp. He leapt into the battle on my behalf, and was killed. What are the chances, my friends, that a trap-laying, hostile Clan such as RiverClan killed two warriors on accident?"

Troutstar hissed, backing away to Brackenstar's side. "You attacked my diplomats," he snarled desparately. "Going to ThunderClan."

"They threatened to attack me and my new deputy." He flicked his tail towards Stormshade. "I only gave them harsh words. Sparrowstar–"

The SkyClan leader stiffened. "Yes?"

"--RiverClan and ThunderClan have allied themselves against me. There are five Clans around the lake." As he spoke, Thornstar slowly

stalked around the branches, settling at Goldenstar's flank. "If you allow them to earn your trust, RiverClan will have a monopoly on power. Three Clans will always outmatch two."

"You can't listen to him," Troutstar retorted, eyeing Sparrowstar desperately. "He's a liar and a coward. He's been talking his way out of problems ever since Cloudstar made him deputy."

"And yet you can't refute anything I've said," Goldenstar replied coolly.

The whole island grew silent, watching the five leaders in awe. On one side, Brackenstar and Troutstar; on the other, Thornstar and Goldenstar.

The tiebreaker, Sparrowstar, in the middle. His gaze flitted from one alliance to the other, nose twitching. He met Troutstar's pleading gaze, then turned towards Goldenstar's confident one.

"The choice is obvious," he mewed calmly.

The warriors on the island seemed to draw in a collective breath. Tails quivered and hearts skipped beats.

"SkyClan shall ally with WindClan."

A cheer erupted from the WindClan warriors, while Timberclaw and Dapplefur each shot Stormshade dirty looks. Sparrowstar went to join his new allies, while Stormshade met Nightshade's shining gaze.

It only took a tiny nod.

They would be friends forever.

* * *

Stormshade was relieved to fall into his nest, fur matted with exhaustion. Though excitement flickered through his pelt, the urge to sleep was too strong to resist.

After a moment of hesitation, he lapped up the poppy seeds Mintfur

had given him, settled down, and let the darkness consume him.

In an instant, the nest beneath him vanished, in favour of open air. He felt himself falling, through hundreds of tree-lengths of nothingness.

Stormshade opened his eyes. He was screaming towards endless, unending moorland beneath him. He would surely die on impact.

His jaws parted. He yowled with fear, but the howling wind swept his screams away.

A great gash in the moorland, like a wound, opened up beneath him. It was filled with water, and it sent pain shooting through his flank on impact.

"Aahow!" Every hair on his pelt, from his cheek to his haunches, was aflame with searing pain. He spluttered, scrambling to the shore and collapsing in the grass.

And then he heard the cries of kits.

Cries of pain.

He slowly hauled himself to his paws, eyes widening when he saw Cloudstar standing over a nest. Three kits, grey and brown, laid in the moss, still and bloody. Crimson speckled the former WindClan leader's paws, chest, and forelegs.

Her jaws opened. In a sing-song voice, she murmured, "*Soon*."

The whole world grew silent and still, save for a great roaring sound in Stormshade's ears.

He blinked, and he was in the warrior's den once more. All the tunnelers of WindClan were peacefully asleep.

Stormshade's heart was pounding. His chest was heaving. His eyes were watering. His fur prickled with horror. What was that?

Uncertainty was pulsing through his chest. *Do I really want to sleep alone again?* His gaze drifted towards the entrance. *Again*?

He knew what he had to do, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to do it.

He looked self-consciously around the den, stood, and padded out into the open starlight.

He ducked into the cool, open-aired moor-runner's den, ears flattening. He stopped by Mouseleap's nest, voice low.

"May I spend the night?"

VII

Now

A torrent of icy rain descended from the clouds, hammering against the grass as Stormshade, hunched and soaking, trotted through WindClan camp.

Quarter-moons had passed since Sparrowstar had allied with WindClan, and with each passing day, Goldenstar had grown more and more excited.

Stormshade glanced longingly towards the warrior's den. *Mouseleap will be waiting for me to return with food.* He glanced up at the sky, wincing as a raindrop landed squarely on his nose. *I'll catch something good for her.*

He shook out his pelt, ducking into a tunnel. A grey tom leaned against the wall, staring him down with slitted yellow eyes.

"You took awhile, apprentice." The tom licked his paw, drawing it over his ears. "Sleeping in again?"

Stormshade shot him a look as he stormed past. "When was the last time you shared a nest with anyone, Sunclaw?"

Sunclaw flinched, following the younger warrior. "I was thinking we could tunnel together, you and I. You remember – *never tunnel alone.*"

Stormshade rounded a corner, quickening his pace. "I'm not an apprentice anymore," he replied swiftly.

Sunclaw nodded. "Of course you aren't," he mewed. His voice had suddenly calmed, his pace slowing as he fell in beside Stormshade. "Listen," he breathed. "You're the... *deputy*, and I think we should talk."

Stormshade felt the tunnel walls brushing against his flanks. It was beginning to squeeze against his whiskers. They were nearing a dead end. The grey warrior came to a stop, lifting a paw to brush at the ceiling. *Clay.* "Then talk."

"I'm sure you'll agree," Sunclaw began, "that RiverClan deserves to be punished."

Stormshade felt his paw seize up. He unsheathed his claws, grazing the clay. "Go on."

"Their territory is marshy. Soft. It'll take one night." Stormshade felt Sunclaw reach up, and heard him claw a scoop out of the wall. "We dig pits. Nice, deep ones. Enough to break a leg. And then... we cover them up and wait."

Stormshade's paw seemed to freeze even more. "*Break* legs?" He murmured. "Sunclaw, we aren't even at war with RiverClan yet. That's–"

"What's wrong with you?" Sunclaw's voice hardened with anger. "Coward! RiverClan's been laying traps on our border for moons!"

"We could kill an apprentice!"

"An apprentice!" Sunclaw's eyes flashed in the darkness, as if he came to a sudden realization. Triumphantly, he met Stormshade's gaze, and growled. "They *killed* Beestream."

Stormshade felt heat well up in his chest. He rounded on Sunclaw, ramming himself into the senior warrior's side and flattening him against the wall. "Don't invoke Beestream to me, you sick rat!"

Sunclaw loosened. Stormshade pressed him into the dirt, growling, before suddenly feeling an explosion of energy beneath him. Sunclaw wrapped his forelegs around his former apprentice's shoulders, dragging him to the ground. Stormshade wrestled for a moment, but it was no use. He felt large paws pressed firmly against his shoulders.

"As soon as you keep your stinking claws to yourself," Sunclaw snarled. Hot breath stirred Stormshade's ear fur, and Stormshade

growled with frustration.

"Eat dirt," he snapped, straining against Sunclaw's pin.

"Is that an order, apprentice? *Deputy*?"

"Get off me!" Stormshade pushed harder. A paw vanished from his shoulders, before reappearing on his forehead. Sunclaw pressed Stormshade's chin into the mud.

"RiverClan gets what it deserves," he snarled. "You wouldn't understand. Weakness is in your blood."

Stormshade attempted to speak, but he couldn't. His muzzle was kept shut by the sheer force of Sunclaw's grip. "*Rr!*"

The senior warrior suddenly sighed, releasing Stormshade. Stormshade heard Sunclaw's tail flick against the wall. "I don't know what Goldenstar sees in you." Fur brushed against the wall, and Sunclaw's voice was suddenly muffled as he added, "*Nobody* does."

Stormshade glared after him, rubbing the mud from his face. *Just one day, StarClan. That's all I want.*

Then

"StarClan, no, not like that!" Sunclaw's tail lashed as he stormed into the centre of the training hollow. He thrusted Swiftpaw and Stormpaw apart with rough paws. "Stormpaw, you're supposed to put effort into it, you daft furball!"

Stormpaw growled, snorting. "I don't understand the point of this move! What am I supposed to do when Swiftpaw sinks his jaws into my throat?"

Sunclaw stiffened, placing his paws shoulder-width apart as he faced his apprentice. "Sink your jaws into my throat," he snapped.

"*What*?"

"Just do it!" Sunclaw's teeth bared.

Swiftpaw's eyes were wide with sympathy as he gazed at his denmate. Stormpaw tried to ignore him, focusing on Sunclaw. *You asked for it,* he thought. *You wanted this.* With a yowl, he launched himself towards his mentor, latching lightly onto his gray-furred throat. Sunclaw's muscles suddenly loosened, and the world blurred as Sunpaw felt a great weight falling onto his skull.

His ears rang. Wind was knocked from his chest, and Stormpaw felt pain flashing through his sternum. *I can't breathe!*

"L-let him go!" Swiftpaw's mew was urgent.

"He'll live." Sunclaw released his grip, leaving Stormpaw heaving and panting on the ground.

"*Haah–ah*!" Stormpaw yelped in pain when a grey paw struck his nose, sending him rolling away. "*Ow*!!"

"Rub some dirt on it," Sunclaw was rolling his eyes, licking his chest, as Stormpaw climbed awkwardly to his paws, muzzle throbbing.

"I think it's bleeding!"

"It'll stop soon." Sunclaw's eyes shone with satisfaction, flitting towards Swiftpaw. "I didn't touch him," he mewed darkly.

The brown apprentice shrunk away from his denmate's mentor. "O-of course."

"If anyone asks, a rock fell from the tunnel roof and struck him. Right, Stormpaw?"

His words didn't register with Stormpaw immediately. He was staring into the grass, which was speckled with blood. *It's so dark.* He could feel pain pulsing through his nose, and he dabbed at it with a paw.

"Don't touch it," Sunclaw ordered. "It'll bloody up your paws. We'll find a stream."

Now

Any mud that lingered on Stormshade's pelt was washed away by the time he returned to camp. Ducking into the warrior's den, he clutched a damp rabbit in his jaws. Mouseleap was there, warm and dry, waiting for him.

"You've slept in," Stormshade mewed brightly. He laid the rabbit down before her eyes. A purr was worming its way into his throat.

"I didn't feel very good last night," Mouseleap explained, taking a cautious bite.

Stormshade settled into the nest next to her, thankful for her warm, dry fur. "Do you feel better?"

Mouseleap sighed. "It... comes and goes." She leaned back, rubbing her head into Stormshade's chest. "I feel much better now."

Stormshade's heart began to beat faster. *What is she doing?* "You're... affectionate."

"And *you're* warm," Mouseleap cooed back. "Everything will be okay now, right? Without Cloudstar?"

Stormshade hesitated. He felt himself relent to something, something deep inside of him, before licking her forehead. "We're safe," he promised quietly. "I'll keep you safe."

"*Mm.*" Mouseleap snuggled up to him, purring. Stormshade relaxed against her, watching her flank rise and fall, and wondered why Cloudstar had put so much effort in keeping them apart. *Everything about this is perfect.* Her ear flicked, and Stormshade suddenly felt a wave of embarrassment wash over him.

"Sorry about my fur," he mewed quietly. "I, uh.. I should've dried off before–"

"Shut up," Mouseleap interrupted. Her voice was muffled by his fur. "I'm trying to sleep."

Stormshade felt his wetted fur prickle self-consciously, and rested a forepaw across her shoulders. "I'll eat the rest of the rabbit–"

"Quiet.." Mouseleap planted a paw on his muzzle, and Stormshade nodded back meekly. She pressed up against him, then fell still.

Her chest rose.

Her chest fell.

She breathed in.

She breathed out.

Stormshade didn't dare move a hair on his pelt, simply staring down at the brown tabby as the den entrance began to rustle. Goldenstar slid in, ears flicking.

"I was looking for you," he murmured, eyes flitting towards the sleeping she-cat.

"Sorry," Stormshade replied, ears flattening. He slowly pressed a paw to Mouseleap's ears, flattening them against her head so that she wouldn't hear them.

"Sunclaw says you and he did some hunting," Goldenstar went on. He slowly picked his way through the den, as though he was trying not to wake Mouseleap. "He told me some concerning things."

"Right?" Stormshade felt relief wash over him. "I don't think he's all there."

Goldenstar's eyes flashed with confusion. "Stormshade, he told me you were scared."

"He told you *what*?"

"He *told me* that you said if it came to war with RiverClan, you wouldn't fight with us. That you wouldn't defend the Clan."

Stormshade's relief subsided, only to be replaced with burning anger. He tried not to stiffen against Mouseleap, and took a deep breath. *Don't hiss. Don't snarl. Stay quiet.* "That's not true," he grumbled.

"What is true?"

Stormshade hesitated. *He knows I don't like Sunclaw. Would he even believe me?* A few heartbeats passed. *Should I gossip?*

"Stormshade?" Goldenstar leaned in.

"Sunclaw had some... strange ways of waging war," Stormshade mewed, struggling to remain calm. "You would've been horrified if you'd heard them."

Goldenstar's tail flicked in acknowledgement. "Well, I want you to know that we aren't out of the woods just because SkyClan took our side. RiverClan and ThunderClan are still threats, and I need my deputy to be loyal."

"I understand."

Goldenstar nodded, satisfied. He angled his ears towards Mouseleap. "She gained weight," he observed.

Stormshade blinked, then looked at the brown tabby. "She wasn't eating much."

"I don't think it's prey," Goldenstar purred. "I'm happy for you."

"What?"

"You may spend the rest of the day with her." Goldenstar dipped his head, before carefully withdrawing. "But... keep in mind what I said."

In his paws, Mouseleap remained peacefully asleep.

* * *

"I hope Woolpaw makes it." Stormshade felt Hailpaw's breath on his tail. "It'd be awkward if I became a warrior but she didn't."

"She'll be fine." Stormshade kept his voice low. He could hear wind howling overhead, through the dirt. *We must be close to the surface.* "Brambleblaze wouldn't give Goldenstar anything but praise for that apprentice."

The ceiling shook lightly with the uniform *thump-thump-thump* of pawsteps speeding by. Stormshade froze. "What was that?"

Hailpaw reached up, pawing at the ceiling. "It was a rabbit," he murmured.

"How do you know?"

"They were fast," Hailpaw reasoned. "And very light. And they came in twos."

Stormshade suppressed a purr, forcing his voice to retain a serious tone. "Very good, Hailpaw. What else does it tell you?"

Stormshade heard fur shifting, and he saw Hailpaw's silhouette press its ear against the tunnel wall. He drew in a breath. "His den might be that way?"

"Speak with more confidence," Stormshade murmured. "Shall we dig towards his den?"

"No?" Hailpaw stiffened, forcing more conviction into his voice. "*No*."

"Why not?"

"Because his pace wasn't slowing. It means his den is probably too far to dig to."

"Excellent." Stormshade licked Hailpaw's cheek, tail raising with glee. "You're doing great."

Hailpaw purred happily in the darkness, and Stormshade turned, extending a foreleg. He felt his paw collide with solid earth. "Can we continue?"

Hailpaw followed his lead, padding up beside his foreleg. He sniffed at the wall. "No plant roots..." there was a scuffling sound, and Hailpaw huffed. "...thick enough to not get stuck beneath our claws, but thin enough to break down. Not a lot of pebbles either. We can continue."

Stormshade nodded, and began to dig. He thrusted his paws into the earth, hauling out well-formed pawfuls of soil and padding them firmly into the tunnel walls. Hailpaw skillfully removed pawful after pawful of earth, and before long, they had advanced many tail-lengths.

Suddenly, Stormshade stopped. He didn't utter a word, angling his ears towards Hailpaw. The apprentice picked up on the silence and froze as well.

"Yes?" Hailpaw's tail twitched in the darkness.

"Break a hole to the surface, but keep it safe." Stormshade braced his forepaws against the tunnel roof. "I'll keep it steady."

Hailpaw hummed, sitting back on his haunches and reaching for the soil above them. While Stormshade held it up, the apprentice chipped away at the dirt, knocking it loose, before digging uptwards. Stormshade felt the weight of the earth pressing down against him, and his muscles burnt with effort. His hind paws sank slightly into the ground.

"You forgot to pack the floor," Stormshade grunted out.

"Sorry!" Hailpaw's fur fluffed self-consciously, and he scampered back. "I-I think the roof is ready."

Stormshade nodded, before heaving upwards. A pile of earth and soil was pushed into open air, and he began to scrabble up after it. He turned to watch as Hailpaw leapt out of the tunnel and into open air. The grey tabby apprentice shook his pelt furiously, his

ears flattened. "Now let's cover the hole!"

"Good call!" Stormshade's chest filled with warmth as he joined his apprentice in pushing the pile of earth into the tunnel. He couldn't help but feel relief when it began to fall back into the hole they had made, and before long, there was hardly a sign that any cat had been underneath the moor.

"Very good!" A grey tom with white paws was seated nearby, licking his chest. "You dug out exactly where Mouseleap said you would!"

Stormshade blinked. "Where is she, Rabbitspark?"

Rabbitspark dipped his head. "She was feeling a little under the weather, so she went to see Mintfur." His gaze shifted to Hailpaw. "*I'll* be assessing your moor running. If you don't mind."

Mouseleap isn't well? Stormshade felt his mind cloud. He forced his fur to remain flat, nodding seriously. "I don't mind at all," he mewed. "Tell me how he does. Hailpaw?"

Stormshade's apprentice shuddered with apprehension. "Yes?"

"Good luck."

Rabbitspark padded up, tail held high. "Chin up, Hailpaw! Keep your fur down and your ears flat! We're going towards RiverClan today!"

Stormshade watched them hare off, worry worming into his chest. *I hope he makes it.* He turned back towards camp. The strength of the wind increased, seeming to push him towards camp. *I should see Mouseleap. I have to.*

And so, like Hailpaw, he pelted through the moor, towards home.

* * *

"Mintfur?" Stormshade shouldered his way into the medicine den, heart thumping with worry. "Is Mouseleap in here?"

"Sh!" Mouseleap's father slapped his tail across Stormshade's lips.

"She's sleeping."

Stormshade nodded, and Mintfur removed his tail. The grey tom turned towards the she-cat. He could feel his eyes round with worry. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine," Mintfur breathed.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Well..." Mintfur licked his chest. "...that's not for me to say." He paused to take a breath, then met Stormshade's gaze. "I–"

"Stormshade?" Mouseleap had awoken.

"Mouseleap!" Stormshade trotted towards her, purring. "Are you alright?"

"I'm doing fine," she mewed back. "Sit with me." She angled her ears at Mintfur, who promptly nodded and left the den.

Stormshade settled into her nest, lightly curling around her with a sigh. "What's been happening?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Mouseleap mewed, settling into him.

Stormshade's pelt wormed with fear. "Stop being so cryptic and tell me!"

"Oh, Stormshade.." She wriggled around in his grip, turning to press her face into his chest. "I'm–you're–... we're going to be parents."

Stormshade felt fear spike through his pelt. "*W-what?*" His heart skipped a beat, and then the fear gave way to warmth. "What?"

"I mean I'm pregnant," she mewed warmly. "With your kits."

The warmth was temporary. Stormshade suddenly felt guilt. *Oh, Beestream... do you mind?* "Is... it going to be okay?"

Mouseleap stiffened against him, as if she were recalling her own troublesome birth. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Stormshade didn't dare tell her why. He only nodded wordlessly, and pressed more tightly against her. "They're going to be safe," he mewed firmly. "I promise."

Then

"Be quiet. Breathe." Stormkit felt Rushstripe's breath on his ear. A tail touched the kit's shoulders, forcing them to relax. "You need to keep your head clear. When you're angry, you try too hard."

Stormkit had wrapped his tiny paws around a large stone. "But.. don't I *have* to try hard?"

"Of course! But other things matter too – form, self-control..." Rushstripe paused, looking away to let out a small cough. "Excuse me."

"You should meet with Harelight!" A grey tom was sauntering into the Stone Clearing. "That cough of yours has been worsening."

"I can still hunt," Rushstripe sniffed. "Thanks for your concern, Sunclaw."

"I only wish for the best."

Stormkit's ears swiveled towards the two tunnelers as he released the stone, dropping back onto all four paws. *Rabbit-dung!*

"You're *always* wishing for the best." Rushstripe chuckled, but then coughed. "I don't buy it."

"Things get difficult." Sunclaw huffed. "Did you hear about Cloudstar? Mintfur says he's going to be a father."

Stormkit scampered up to his father, worming his way between his forepaws.

"I mean to say," Sunclaw went on, "That it worries me. You know,

female leaders can't have kits. It's against the code."

Rushstripe squirmed. "I... you know I don't like talking about the code... "

"Maybe things would be different if you *did*," Sunclaw replied icily.

"Not here," Rushstripe hissed back. "We can talk about it when I'm not with my son."

Stormkit peeked out from his father's forepaws. "Cloudstar's going to be a mother?" He mewled.

"Yes." Rushstripe licked his ears. "You're going to have a lot of friends."

"Where's *my* mother?" Stormkit ducked away from his father's muzzle, and Sunclaw's eyes gleamed.

"Good question, Stormkit!" He grinned. "Rushstripe?"

Rushstripe was now squirming again. He coughed lightly, before he hesitantly mewed, "Your mother is somewhere safe."

"Free from codebreakers, I'm sure!" Sunclaw gave a good-natured flick of his tail, turning away. "Well, I should be going. I just wanted to check on my best friend and his little kit." With that, the warrior trotted back up the hill, ears perked. Stormkit could feel his father's muscles stiffen with outrage.

"I don't know what's gotten into him," he growled. "Come, Stormkit. Let's get back to work."

Now

"Stormshade!" Goldenstar's yellow pelt reflected the moonlight. "Has Hailpaw learnt what it is to be a warrior? Does he understand the importance of the Warrior Code?"

Stormshade felt as though his chest would burst with pride. *First the kits, now this!* "He does, Goldenstar."

The Clan leader nodded, beaming warmly. "Fantastic. Warriors of StarClan, I call on you to look down upon my deputy's apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the purpose of your noble code, and in turn I commend him to you as a warrior."

Stormshade grinned, nudging his shaking apprentice forward. "*Go*," he murmured.

"Hailpaw." Goldenstar dipped his head reverently. "Do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to fight for and defend WindClan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Hailpaw couldn't help but stare sheepishly at his paws.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Hailpaw, from this day forward, you shall be known as Hailstorm. StarClan honours your competence and your loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of WindClan."

The whole camp seemed eager to chant, but Goldenstar held up his tail. "Brambleblaze, step forward!"

The brown tabby tom padded towards the tallrock. "I am here, Goldenstar."

"Brambleblaze, has Woolpaw learnt what it is to be a warrior? Does she understand the importance of the Warrior Code?"

Brambleblaze seemed to faint a little as he gave an emphatic nod. "*I* think so, Goldenstar!"

"Woolpaw?"

The soft-furred white she-cat padded ahead of her mentor, shuddering with anticipation. "Yes?"

"Do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to fight for and defend WindClan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do!"

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name." Goldenstar puffed his chest, raising his voice. "From this day forward, Woolpaw, you shall be known as Woolshine. StarClan honours your heart and willingness to learn, and we welcome you as a full warrior of WindClan." The WindClan leader lept from the tallrock, landing with a thud in the centre of camp as he lifted his chin. "Woolshine!" he called. "Hailstorm!"

"Woolshine!" Brambleblaze joined in.

"Hailstorm!" Stormshade crowed.

Slowly, the rest of the Clan joined in, yowling the new warriors' names to StarClan.

"Woolshine! Hailstorm!"

And then, once more, Goldenstar raised his tail for silence. "We must all leave our two newest warriors be," he mewed. "We may all sleep in safety, with them watching over us."

Stormshade purred, padding towards his former apprentice. "You look older already," he purred.

"I hope not!" Hailstorm rubbed his muzzle against Stormshade's, giggling like an apprentice. "I haven't even gotten a mate yet!"

"Good luck on your vigil," Stormshade felt nothing but warmth for the young warrior. "Remember, you can't talk."

Hailstorm nodded. "I know."

Goldenstar wandered towards them, his shining eyes brimming with excitement. "Stormshade, do you want to go tunneling with me? We can check on Hailstorm and Woolshine on the way back in."

Stormshade dipped his head at his leader. "I'd love to, but Mouseleap–"

"Say no more!" Goldenstar's expression was that of understanding.

He leaned closer to his deputy, murmuring, "These are the precious moments."

"It's okay." Sunclaw prowled into the group now, whiskers twitching. "*I'll* join you, Goldenstar."

"Thank you!" Goldenstar blinked gratefully at the senior warrior, then nodded at Stormshade. "Have a good night, my friend."

Stormshade took a deep breath, forcing his claws to remain sheathed. *It's only Sunclaw.* He drove his spiking fur back to his spine, gritting his teeth. "Good luck again, Hailstorm." He grunted, dipping his head, and padded warily towards the medicine den.

Mintfur stood in his way. "Yes?"

"Can I come in?"

The medicine cat winced. His eyes betrayed subtle panic. "I..."

"You're worried."

Mintfur looked away, ashamed. "Yes."

Stormshade padded to his side, sitting next to him. "Why?"

"Cloudstar." He stared out into the camp, watching the warriors disperse. "Harelight couldn't save our kits, Stormshade. And he was a much better medicine cat than I. *StarClan*!" He rubbed his paws into the ground, groaning. "What if–if Mouseleap–"

Stormshade pressed against him. Secretly, he hoped nobody was watching. *For both of our sakes.* "You're a fine medicine cat," he insisted. "I promise, I will protect Mouseleap."

Mintfur was silent for several heartbeats. Stormshade welcomed the silence, hoping his words would settle with the worried father. The cats dispersed, and Hailstorm and Woolshine took their places at the edge of camp. At last, Mintfur spoke.

"Do you love her?"

The question made Stormshade flinch. He didn't know. "I... do. Since we were apprentices."

"But Cloudstar ruined it."

Stormshade nodded weakly. "That is what I hate her most for."

Mintfur nodded with understanding. "I'm so sorry."

"You did all you could," Stormshade murmured back. "You were only a warrior, and she was Clan leader."

"You two would've been great together."

"Yeah..." Stormshade stared at his paws. "I just... feel like I'm doing something wrong. Like Beestream would be angry with me."

"That's ridiculous." Mintfur was shaking his head. "Stormshade, you never were one for being alone. Beestream would've understood that."

The words cut deep. *I told Mouseleap the same thing,* he recalled. *I don't want to be alone.* "I'm glad I have you," Stormshade murmured.

"And I'm glad you're my daughter's mate." Mintfur dipped his head. "I couldn't wish for anyone better."

"Help!" A frightened yelp caught the attention of both toms, who leapt to their paws. Sunclaw pelted into camp, fur bushing with fear. "The tunnel collapsed! And Goldenstar is still inside!"

VIII

Now

The clouds had begun to obscure the moon as the tunnelers of WindClan thundered across the moor, eyes wide and fur spiked. Stormshade's heart thumped as he followed Sunclaw through the heather. Sunclaw ripped clumps of grass and soil from the ground as he sprinted, leading the patrol to the collapsed tunnel.

Suddenly, Sunclaw came to a clumsy halt, panting. "Here!" He began to claw at soft soil. "He's in here!"

Stormshade leapt to his side, attempting to join him, but Shaleflame shouldered between them with outstretched paws. "Make some room!"

It's too crowded! Stormshade felt claws graze his foreleg as Swiftleap tried to start digging. Soon, a cluster of warriors had assembled around the tunnel entrance. *Goldenstar's doomed!*

"Out of my way, apprentice!" Swiftleap was snapping at Hailstorm.

"I can't *do* anything with you waving your claws around!" Hailstorm's panicked mew was hardened with frustration.

Stormshade felt flanks brush his. Shoulder pressed against straining shoulder as the tunnelers clawed uselessly at the soil. The WindClan deputy's heart skipped a beat. *Someone needs to do something,* he realized. *And I'm the deputy.*

"Everyone stop!" He tried to pry Shaleflame from the dirt, but the warrior wouldn't budge. Stormshade suppressed a growl. "*Stop*!"

Sunclaw narrowed his eyes. "I see what you're doing," he snarled. "You want to become leader."

"I want to save Goldenstar, rabbit-brain!" Stormshade tossed his head. "Head uphill with Hailstorm and try to dig *down* to him."

Sunclaw seemed as though he was about to make a biting retort, but merely gave a hefty nod as he and Hailstorm withdrew.

Stormshade caught Woolshine's gaze. "Woolshine and Brambleblaze will try to reach him through a connected tunnel."

Woolshine blinked, horrified. "But–"

"What about me?" Swiftleap's eyes were wide with concern.

"You and I are digging here." Stormshade's tail whipped as he turned back towards the soil and began to tunnel. "Give me a paw!"

"Stormshade!" Woolshine's mew was urgent. "Brambleblaze is gone!"

Stormshade's paws froze. "*What*?"

"He left when my vigil started!"

"Fox-dung!" Stormshade's paws picked up speed, and he tore at the soil with frustration. *Idiot!* "*Fox-dung, fox-dung, fox-dung*! Swiftleap, go with her! I'll dig here!"

"Yes, deputy!" Swiftleap was away in an instant as he and Woolshine hared away.

Stormshade hunched, his paws a flash as he worked his way into the earth. *Please let him be alive.* He could feel droplets of mud falling onto his shoulders as he ducked into an ever-growing hole. *I'm not ready.*

There was a muffled groan. Stormshade's forelegs were sore with the effort. *I'm not ready.* He wrapped his forepaws around a stone, yanking it aside and plunging his forelegs into a cluster of gravel. He winced in pain as the tiny stones snagged his claws. *I'm not ready, and the Clan knows I'm not ready.*

Pebbles rained around him, dancing around his hindquarters as he shoveled them free. *The whole lake will know how much of a failure I*

am.

He could hear a yelp through the dirt as his claws struck warm flesh.

"Goldenstar!" Stormshade felt something deep inside his chest leap upwards, into his throat. "I'm here!"

The dirt fell free, revealing the WindClan leader's handsome golden face. "Oh, StarClan!"

Stormshade clamped his jaws around Goldenstar's scruff, yanking back with all his might. He felt a tinge of excitement as he felt the earth around Goldenstar give, only for it to be replaced with dread as it fell still.

Goldenstar was trapped.

"The ceiling—" Goldenstar blinked dust from his eyes. "It's too much weight."

Stormshade clawed at the soil around his shoulders. "It isn't!" He insisted. "I have you!"

"I can't... I can't feel my chest." Goldenstar's voice was breathless.

Stormshade clawed harder, attempting to uncover Goldenstar's forepaws. *He can help me dig!* "I *have* you!"

"StarClan..." the great leader's head drooped, and he began to slump.

Crack!

Stormshade stumbled back as a shower of dirt rained down onto him. Grey paws burst through the ceiling, and Stormshade caught Hailstorm and Sunclaw's scent.

"Great StarClan!" He blinked, grateful for the moonlight. "I need help digging him out! The ceiling is crushing him!"

Sunclaw nodded, motioning to Hailstorm to help him. The pair

began to paw at the earth above Goldenstar, taking weight off of the leader's body.

Stormshade took Goldenstar's scruff again, grunting with effort as he began to pull back.

The WindClan leader jerked forward. Stormshade felt dirt cover his forepaws. He continued to pull. The ache in his shoulders spread to his forelegs, his neck, his jaws. *Keep pulling!*

"*Rr!*" Stormshade felt Goldenstar pull loose, and, slowly but surely, began to walk backwards. "I–I think I–"

Sunclaw braced his forepaws against Goldenstar's exposed shoulders. Hailstorm continued to claw at the dirt around his hindquarters. Every step Stormshade took was easier than the last.

Suddenly, the weight disappeared from his jaws as Goldenstar came crashing to the tunnel floor, coughing. "StarClan!"

Hailstorm's eyes flashed with concern. "Are you okay?"

Stormshade forced a shoulder beneath the leader's side, helping him to his paws. "Can you walk?"

"I'm fine!" Goldenstar's eyes were wild with pain. "My ribs–"

Stormshade looked up at Hailstorm. "Tell Woolshine and Swiftleap we got him! And when you're done, get Mintfur, for StarClan's sake!"

As Hailstorm scrabbled up through his tunnel, Sunclaw slithered down into the tunnel, fur rippling as he pressed against Goldenstar's other side.

"It's a miracle you pulled that off!" Goldenstar flinched with every word. "I–I thought I was a goner."

Stormshade glared at Sunclaw. "What happened?"

"The tunnel collapsed, apprentice." Stormshade felt Sunclaw press more tightly against Goldenstar. "What do you mean?"

Stormshade growled. "You were alone with him."

"What are you implying, fox-heart?"

"Enough!" Goldenstar paused, coughing. "Stormshade, Sunclaw didn't do it. The cave collapsed on its own."

Stormshade's fur rippled uneasily. *I don't believe that.* "Caves don't collapse on their own," he sniffed. "We work night and day to keep them *up*!"

"Brambleblaze dug that tunnel," Sunclaw mewed quickly. "Part of a training exercise with Woolshine."

Stormshade felt Goldenstar lurch, and realized that one of his legs must've been broken. "How... were you still alive?"

Goldenstar slowed, ears flattening. "I... shouldn't be," he admitted. He lowered his cracking voice, wheezing. "I died. F-four times."

Stormshade and Sunclaw exchanged looks. Goldenstar's face had an expression of pure terror as he recalled his experience.

"I.. I couldn't breathe. It took so long. And then I'd go to StarClan, and they'd send me back..." he grew silent for a moment, before whimpering, "..by the second life, I was begging them to let me die."

Stormshade felt a pang in his chest. *I could've stopped him.* Rage welled up within him. *Sunclaw let this happen. Goldenstar asked me to go with him and I refused.*

"Brambleblaze should be punished," Sunclaw murmured quietly. "Goldenstar, we need to show the Clan what happens when we are irresponsible with our tunnels."

Goldenstar flicked his tail. "I need sleep," he mumbled.

Stormshade froze. "I smell Brambleblaze."

Sunclaw paused as well. "He's close. Over the next hill."

Goldenstar's eyes were wild. Stormshade wasn't sure if it was pain

or something else. "Take me to him," he growled.

Stormshade shook his head. "Goldenstar, you need rest–"

"Don't disobey your leader!" Sunclaw shot his former apprentice a glare, which Stormshade returned.

"Take me," Goldenstar hissed, "To him."

Stormshade refused, but Sunclaw began to pad after Brambleblaze's scent trail. Goldenstar leaned heavily on the senior warrior's shoulder, and for the first time Stormshade saw what had happened to him.

Bent tail... broken leg... the weight of the earth tore clumps of his pelt off as we pulled him free. StarClan, he's in no position to discipline Brambleblaze! Guilt began to wash over him. *Because I wasn't there to stop the collapse.*

"Sunclaw!" Stormshade's growl was now a pleading mew. "Take him back to camp!"

Sunclaw didn't even acknowledge Stormshade's order as he and Goldenstar disappeared over the hill. Swallowing a whine, Stormshade raced after them. I'll take him back myself! Make right of all this!

He crested the hill, ears flat with shame. "Sunclaw, I told you to–"

"Look what we found, apprentice." Sunclaw flashed him a look, ears flicking.

"Now's not the time, you–" Stormshade broke off when he saw two cats at the ThunderClan border.

Brambleblaze and a brown-and-black she-cat were curled up together in a makeshift nest. Stormshade recognized her as Dapplefur, the ThunderClan deputy.

Goldenstar's gaze was blank, as though he wasn't surprised.

Sunclaw's tail lashed. "Codebreaker." He bared his teeth, raising his

voice. "Codebreaker!"

Brambleblaze stirred, yawning, before catching sight of the WindClan warriors. He leapt from his nest with a yelp, hackles lifting defensively. "It isn't what it looks like!"

Goldenstar's ear flicked. "Goodbye," he growled.

Brambleblaze's gaze flashed with horror as Dapplefur climbed to her paws. "W-what?" His hackles lowered, and his shoulders sagged. "What do you–"

"You *know* what." Goldenstar peeled himself away from Sunclaw, limping forward. "ThunderClan is our enemy, *traitor*." He attempted to straighten, grunting with pain as weight was applied to his broken leg. "You have until moonhigh tonight to leave WindClan territory."

Sunclaw nodded in agreement, while Stormshade simply stared. *What else is there to do?* Dapplefur narrowed her eyes when she met his gaze.

Goldenstar took no notice. He simply continued to speak. "If any warrior of WindClan catches you on our territory, you will be killed and denied a vigil."

Brambleblaze choked. He shook off Dapplefur, stepping forward. "Goldenstar, I–"

The leader gave him no reply, simply turning and limping home. He didn't seem to notice Stormshade.

Stormshade wasn't sure if he wanted to be noticed. He tore his gaze from a distraught Brambleblaze, meeting Sunclaw's fiery eyes. *What are you planning?*

Sunclaw snorted, raising his brow. "Perhaps Rushstripe was lucky."

* * *

"Have you seen Woolshine?" Hailstorm's mew was thick with worry. "She went hunting two nights ago, and hasn't returned."

Stormshade felt sorry for the young tom. "I'm sure she'll come back."

"And I'm sure she's gone after her old mentor," Sunclaw was picking at the prey-heap. His tongue swiped around his jaws. "Do you really think you belong here any more than she did, rogue?"

Hailstorm's fur rose with anger as Stormshade stood to confront his former mentor.

"What's your problem?"

Sunclaw shrugged. "I'm worried about the Clan, apprentice." Looking over his shoulder, he added, "There are traitors in our midst."

"We can never be too careful." Goldenstar was padding from Mintfur's den, fur bushed as though he had just woken up. "You know, Nightbreeze was born in ThunderClan..."

Stormshade couldn't believe his ears. *I must have bees in my brain!* "You aren't serious!" He padded forward, brow furrowing. "Goldenstar, Nightbreeze has been with us for seasons!"

"And Brambleblaze was with us since he was *born*." Goldenstar's gruff mew was muffled as he bent to pick up a rabbit.

Stormshade couldn't hear Sunclaw's reply. The noise of the world seemed to dim as he blinked. *What'll happen next?*

I need to sleep. Stormshade clearly wasn't thinking right. He turned, slowly making his way towards the nursery.

"Mouseleap?" Stormshade could hardly manage to speak as he ducked inside.

"Evening, love." Mouseleap yawned, and for a moment everything seemed okay once more. Stormshade felt a piece of his heart melt. *Her yawn is nice.* His pelt brushed hers as he settled into their nest, and Mouseleap pressed her spine against his chest.

"Tough evening." Stormshade rested his chin on her shoulder, eying her. "Ever since the tunnel collapse last quarter-moon, Goldenstar's

been... off."

Mouseleap turned to lick his cheek. "He just needs time to recover," she murmured. "He almost died."

He did *die*. Stormshade shuddered, grateful for her comfort. He pressed against her, stretching his neck to peer out of the den entrance. Dark clouds were gathering over the moor.

Mouseleap's breath stirred his ear. "What do you want to name them?"

Stormshade blinked. "Hm?"

"The kits." Mouseleap's eyes sparkled. "I had some ideas." Her cheek pressed against his. "You're grey. I'm brown. One kit will be taupe."

"Hm.."

"Cougarkit!" Mouseleap purred. "Isn't that adorable?"

Stormshade shifted uncomfortably, fur pricking. "I guess..."

Mouseleap slumped. "Have some fun, Stormshade. This is a great moment for us."

"I know!" Stormshade stood, shaking out his pelt. "I just worry, Mouseleap. We're at war with half the lake, Goldenstar is acting up, and I just don't know if it's very safe for our kits."

"Of course it is!" Mouseleap's brow furrowed. "WindClan's been through worse!"

"Maybe the worst isn't here yet," Stormshade growled darkly. He turned on his paws, tail flicking. "I think I need to take a walk."

"Don't take long!" Mouseleap called after him.

Stormshade turned to reply as he exited, only to catch a glimpse of Sunclaw by the den entrance.

"Interesting conversation," he murmured. "Goldenstar is acting up,

you say?"

Stormshade narrowed his eyes. "That's what I said, Sunclaw."

"That's a grave accusation, apprentice.." Sunclaw flexed his claws. "Our leader needs support now more than anything else, but you've done nothing but second-guess him ever since the tunnel collapse."

There was a beat of silence. Stormshade sank his claws into the dirt. "I try to do the right thing," he snarled back..

"You *try* to serve yourself," Sunclaw replied swiftly. "You're talking about leaving WindClan because you're *scared*. Even now, your tail is quivering."

Stormshade heated, and his cheeks began to burn. "I'm no coward, Sunclaw!"

Sunclaw chuckled. "Keep your fur on. Goldenstar has a job for us. He wanted me to make sure you stayed in line."

"In line?" Stormshade's tail lashed. "I'm your deputy!"

Sunclaw ignored him. "It's a little thing on the RiverClan border..."

Then

Stormpaw whisked snow from his tail as he slogged his way through the mud, grumbling.

"Remember to watch your paws." Sunclaw was ahead, licking his paws clean from the safety of a log. "A wrong step can submerge you up to your chest."

"I *wish*." Stormpaw pulled a paw free. The mud seemed to grab on, as if it was holding onto the apprentice with all its might.

Sunclaw eyed him. "Don't want to go home?"

Stormpaw flicked an ear. "Not really."

"I don't blame you. The whole Clan is falling apart," Sunclaw growled. "Stormpaw, our own leader broke the code when she decided to have kits."

Stormpaw slogged forward, the mud schlopping beneath him, and hoisted himself onto the log. "Why are we even out here, Sunclaw?"

Sunclaw's nose wrinkled. "Cloudstar becomes leader and who does she make deputy? *Goldentooth*." His voice was low. "I'm *right here,* and she chooses some young kit to help lead the Clan."

"...Sunclaw?" Stormpaw lifted a paw, shaking the mud free. "Why are we here?"

Sunclaw blinked, taking in a sharp breath. "Do you respect me, Stormpaw?"

No. "Of course."

"Good." Sunclaw licked his chest, ears flicking. "You need to know your place."

Now

"It's all so perfect." Goldenstar was surveying the RiverClan border, his fur flat and his voice calm. "Our allies surround ThunderClan on all sides, Stormshade."

The grey tom followed his gaze, wondering if he *really* wanted to participate in Goldenstar's new plan. "Woolshine hasn't come home yet," he murmured.

"Forget Woolshine. SkyClan and ShadowClan are willing to crush ThunderClan on my word." Goldenstar grinned. "RiverClan, on the other hand... poses a threat."

"You won't back out of this, right?" Sunclaw padded up to the pair, yellow eyes boring into Stormshade's pelt.

"...No." Stormshade shook out his pelt. "I want WindClan to be safe."

Sunclaw nodded curtly, but said no more. It was Goldenstar who began to speak.

"It won't be difficult at all," he murmured. "Not one bit. Marshland is easy to dig through. I reckon we can lay our traps along the entire border before sundown."

Stormshade shifted on his paws, ears swiveling backwards. Goldenstar began to pad downhill. Sunclaw leaned towards Stormshade, eyes gleaming mischievously.

"Remember," he hissed, "This'll only make it safer for your kits."

Stormshade blinked. How could he argue with that? Reluctantly, he followed the pair downhill, ears flattened to his skull. Down the way, he could see Swiftleap leading Hailstorm and Shaleflame through Horseplace, towards the opposite end of the RiverClan border. *Sunclaw really got everyone in on this.*

He thought about when Sunclaw first revealed his plans. *We dig holes,* he had said. *Deep enough to break a leg.*

"What if we hurt an apprentice?" Stormshade's mew was cautious.

Sunclaw scoffed. "Cold paws."

"I'm starting to wonder where the loyalties of my deputy lie." Goldenstar's mew was edged with a growl, and Stormshade's throat burnt with indignance.

"I only have to think about the battle with ThunderClan," Stormshade replied.

Goldenstar froze. "The battle?"

"When Brackenstar blinded Cloudstar." Stormshade took a step towards his leader, forcing his voice to remain firm. "He said

Cloudstar's schemes nearly killed an apprentice. Our cats were hurt."

"Don't listen to him, Goldenstar." Sunclaw rested a paw on Goldenstar's shoulder. "Nobody will challenge us when this is done with. It won't matter!"

"It *will!*" Stormshade's voice rose. "Goldenstar, think!"

Goldenstar's jaws parted. It seemed as if he was about to reply, but not a mew escaped his lips.

Sunclaw suddenly stepped in front of him. "I marked out the perfect spots, Goldenstar." He turned towards the border, pointing with his tail. "Beneath the tree there... beside that rock... on that riverbank... I imagine cats will hunt and train there."

Goldenstar blinked furiously, as if he had just woken up from a deep slumber. "Stormshade," he murmured, "Go fetch us branches. Leaves, twigs, reeds."

"We'll need to cover the traps up, apprentice." Sunclaw nodded back towards the moor. "Best start searching."

Stormshade gritted his teeth. "I'll get... right to work."

* * *

Stormshade hadn't scraped together a single twig. He was sitting on a hillside, watching the sun set over the glowing lake. *It really is peaceful here,* he thought. *So far away from everything else.*

The wind howled around him, flattening his whiskers to his face. Stormshade felt grass brushing against his haunches and flanks, and sighed. *I'm so tired. And I didn't even know it.*

He could smell rabbit in the air. Perhaps it was hopping towards its den, or feasting on grass. *Whatever it's doing, I'm sure it's happy.*

He climbed to his paws, turning back towards camp. The sunlight reflected positively off of the mountainsides. *The moonpool is in there somewhere,* he thought. *Safe.* It was dazzlingly beautiful, and

suddenly he felt an urge to sit back down and admire the view.

But something was off. Pawsteps were in the distance.

Frantic, fast pawsteps.

Riversong burst over the hill, long fur spiking. "Mintfur needs you!" Her eyes were wide with urgency. "*Now*!"

"Why?" Stormshade stumbled away from her, heart pounding.

"It's Mouseleap! Come on!"

Stormshade's own pelt spiked, and in an instant he was haring off towards the WindClan camp.

Riversong caught up to him easily, the moor-runner hardly breaking a sweat. "Mintfur wants you to be there when it's over with!" Stormshade barely heard her over the howling wind and the thrumming of his own heart.

The WindClan camp was oddly still when he arrived. The warriors still in camp had gathered along its outskirts, as though they were wary of going too close to the nursery.

Stormshade could smell fear. *Mintfur's*. He wondered if he should go into the nursery, but just then Galetrot padded to his side, steering him towards the prey heap.

"Stormshade!" His voice had a tone of forced happiness. "Would you like to join me for a rabbit?"

"I–"

"Mouseleap's *fine*," he purred. Stormshade heated, his heart pounding. *He knows I'm scared.*

"I appreciate the help, Galetrot, but–"

"I'm actually here to tell you," Galetrot lowered his voice, "You're a lucky tom."

"What?"

"Mouseleap is an impressive cat, Stormshade!" Galetrot purred. "Tough as a fox, I tell you."

Just as he finished speaking, an anguished yowl erupted from the nursery. Stormshade winced, beginning to bristle.

"...And very passionate, too." Galetrot bundled him out of camp, pelt pricking awkwardly. Stormshade didn't resist. He wanted to get the scent of Mintfur's fear out of his nostrils.

Outside, Goldenstar and Sunclaw were stalking towards camp.

"*There* you are!" Goldenstar's tail was lashing. "StarClan, have you gathered a single twig?"

"It isn't his fault," Galetrot mewed sharply. He stepped between leader and deputy, chin high. "Mouseleap is kitting."

Stormshade searched Goldesntar's gaze for the understanding he had shown just a few moons prior, but there was nothing there. Goldenstar's lips twitched. "..I suppose that's a good enough reason."

Stormshade blinked at him. *What's happening to him?* His heart thundered in his chest, and he wondered if Mouseleap was in much pain. *Oh, StarClan, make it end soon.*

There was another moment of silence. The nursery shook as Mouseleap let out another yowl of pain, then all fell silent. Nobody dared to breathe.

"...Maybe you should, ah..." Galetrot licked his chest. "...check on her."

"You're right." Stormshade gave Goldenstar a gruff nod, then turned on his heels, trotting towards the nursery.

The colour of the world seemed to drain from the moor. Cats stepped back to let him pass. The hunger gnawing at Stormshade's belly was now a small tickle, paling in comparison to the dreadful ball in his throat.

Slowly, like a terrified kit, Mintfur poked his head out from the nursery. His eyes were red with tears. "You can't come in," he mumbled.

Stormshade stopped in his tracks. "What?"

Mintfur lifted a paw to dab at his nose, letting out a long, pained *snnnnrrrk*. "I..."

Stormshade shook out his pelt. "I'm going to see my kits," he growled, shouldering past him.

Mouseleap laid in her nest, her once gleaming eyes dark. Her flank wasn't heaving like Stormshade thought it would be. The kits were still. Stormshade paused, taking a moment to swallow the emotions bubbling in his throat, and extended a paw to touch Mouseleap's soft pelt.

She was still warm.

Mintfur was at his side now. Stormshade saw heartbreak in his eyes – the same heartbreak was there when Cloudstar's litter passed. *Mouseleap was the only survivor.*

"I'm sorry." Mintfur sounded as if he could hardly gather the breath to speak. "I became a medicine cat so I would never have to lose again, but–" He choked. "--I killed her."

Stormshade felt a wave of realization rising in his chest, and he forced it down with a grunt. *No.* "What do you mean?'

"I killed my kit." Mintfur was beginning to sob. "I failed. I–"

Stormshade turned back to Mouseleap. He touched her again. She was beginning to cool.

No.

He stepped towards his broken family, vision dimming. He remembered the last dream he had with Cloudstar.

The nest beneath her.

The blood on her paws.

She had uttered one word: *Soon.*

"This isn't happening," Stormshade whispered.

Mintfur shuddered. Stormshade turned his gaze to the kits. He could smell a crowd gathering outside the nursery.

The kits were perfect, but utterly still.

A brown she-kit.

A grey she-kit.

And a taupe tom.

Stormshade nosed him, and felt his heart break in two. *You would've been Cougarkit.*

He withdrew. Stormshade couldn't look at them anymore. Numbness wormed its way through his paws, up his chest, and down his spine. Mintfur quietly exited the den, and Stormshade followed.

The Clan was there. Galetrot opened his jaws, then closed them. Mintfur cleared his throat.

"My Clan," he murmured, "I was not meant to be a medicine cat. I was a warrior, but when my kits died, I resolved to never let it happen again." He hung his head, ears flattening. "I had only one goal, and I failed. I killed my daughter. I killed three of my grandkits."

Goldenstar shouldered his way to the front of the crowd, ears flicking. "What do you mean to say, Mintfur?"

"I'm done." Mintfur paused, lifting his muzzle to meet Goldenstar's eyes. "I have failed WindClan for the last time. I wish to put myself into exile."

Whatever remained of Stormshade's heart seemed to shatter. "You

can't!" He pressed his muzzle into Mintfur's shoulder, beginning to sob. "Don't go," he whimpered. "Everyone goes."

Mintfur softened against him, and reluctantly withdrew. "This is *my* fault, Stormshade."

Goldenstar gave a nod. "If you wish to go, go." He stepped aside, forming an opening in the crowd. Mintfur dipped his head, and without another word, left.

Stormshade fell to his haunches, trying to blink the tears from his eyes. *It's over.* His chest tightened. *I'll never share a nest with anyone ever again.* His ears began to lower, and his whiskers began to droop. *I'll never see my kits become warriors.*

He could faintly see Rushstripe. He remembered the thrill that washed over him when his father gave him badger rides. He remembered Rushstripe's giant paws pinning him to the dirt when they wrestled.

I'm sorry. I'll never be like you.

Then

"I want to tell you something, son." Rushstripe curled a paw around Stormkit, drawing him to his flank.

Stormkit looked up at his father. He looked so proud. "Yes?"

"Goldentooth told me this." Rushstripe's face glowed. "He was only an apprentice then, and it was the greatest thing I had ever heard."

Stormkit settled into his father's fur, peering up at him. "What was it?"

"It was the best nursery story ever." Rushstripe cleared his throat. "We've all heard about the exploits of Firestar, or Windstar, or Shattered Ice." His voice boomed theatrically with the mention of

every great figure. "Their names are remembered for generations after they die, Stormkit. We always look back on them with so much awe and admiration. But now, our Clans have grown quiet. We haven't produced a legend in seasons."

"Why not?" Stormkit felt a weight on his shoulders. *This isn't a very nice story.*

"Because we admire the past, but we think too little of ourselves. We imagine that, if anyone will be the next Firestar, it'll be someone else. But the thing is, like you and me, Firestar started with nothing." He lowered his voice, as if his next words were very important. "He had a vision, however, and he decided to act. To do the right thing. To strive for greatness. Goldentooth said that we should all do that – we can produce *new* Firestars, if only we try." He licked Stormkit's cheek, purring. "Be the subject of your own legend, Stormkit. I know you can."

IX

Now

Stormshade's breath billowed out around him, fogging up in the nighttime air. Long moorland grass brushed against his flanks as he followed Goldenstar to the gathering isle.

Sunclaw, Galetrot, and Shaleflame were in tow. Goldenstar had wanted most of the Clan to remain at camp and preserve their energy, for reasons unknown.

Stormshade shook out his pelt, absent-mindedly sheathing and unsheathing his claws. *I hate this.*

"Tonight is the night, Stormshade." Goldenstar's eyes were sparkling, but not in the way Stormshade would've liked them to. "There is change in the air. Can you taste it?"

Stormshade hummed in false agreement. Goldenstar was wrong. The air was thick with unease.

The gathering isle felt worse than any other place on the lake. The whole world dimmed as the moon became covered entirely, and Goldenstar held his head high as he led his small patrol through the bushes and into the heart of the island.

Only ThunderClan and SkyClan had arrived. Sparrowstar dipped his head respectfully at the arrival of his ally, while Brackenstar gave a

suspicious flick of his tail.

Stormshade slowed, allowing Goldenstar to pull ahead. He searched the throng of ThunderClan warriors for a familiar pelt. *Did Brambleblaze come here?* He knew the answer. *ThunderClan will never truly trust him.*

"Is it true?" A light voice almost made Stormshade jump out of his fur. He whirled around.

"What?"

A flame-pelted tom blinked at him. "Brambleblaze said you were there when he was exiled." He paused, licking his chest self-conciously. "Was he really with Dapplefur?"

Stormshade shifted, uncomfortable. This ThunderClan warrior was being unusually friendly. "I.. he was."

"...*crazy*." The ginger tom whistled, tail flicking with amusement. "Brackenstar *said* she had broken the code, but I guess I didn't believe it."

"Neither do I," Stormshade sighed.

"I'm sorry." The ginger lifted a paw, allowing his claws to catch the moon. "Brambleblaze is really crushed, though. He... basically sits on the border every night and watches the moor. I think he really misses you."

Galetrot was suddenly at Stormshade's side, eyes slitted. "What do you care?"

The ginger began to speak, but he was cut off by a beautiful long-furred grey she-cat. Her pelt shone silver in the moonlight. "Firefur! Come with me– I found something!"

Stormshade stared at the she-cat for a moment. *Cinderdusk?* He recognized her from earlier gatherings, but suddenly he couldn't look away. Galetrot softened against him, and the two toms watched as Firefur was led away.

A few beats of silence ensued. Galetrot let out a long, slow, gasp. "Did you just see that?" He whispered. "I...I think she looked at me."

Stormshade shook out his pelt. "Keep your pelt on, Galetrot. You have a mate."

"I... can still look, right?"

"*StarClan.*" Stormshade gave the young warrior a rough cuff over the ear. "You're pathetic."

Galetrot shook out his pelt, a challenge in his eyes. "I–"

He broke off suddenly, turning to watch as ShadowClan and RiverClan arrived, mingling awkwardly with one another to cross the tree-bridge. Stormshade huffed, separating himself from Galetrot and straightening. He fell in with Nightshade, who was going to meet the other deputies.

"Stormshade!" The sleek black tom dipped his head. "Are you okay? You look tired."

Stormshade licked his chest. "I haven't been sleeping well," he admitted. "I'm having a rough time."

Nightshade gave a respectful nod. "Ah." He touched his nose to his friend's ear, adding, "Stay strong."

Stormshade flinched away from the ShadowClan deputy, ears twitching self-consciously. "I will."

"Perhaps we shall begin." Goldenstar's voice was low, and yet it boomed authoritatively across the island. Thornstar and Troutstar scrabbled up the Great Oak, eager not to be late to the gathering. Brackenstar shifted to give his RiverClan ally room.

Stormshade followed Nightshade to the foot of the Oak, where the other deputies were waiting. Dapplefur was staring shamefully at her paws, unwilling to meet anyone's gaze. Timberclaw's throat fur still hadn't grown back, and Fallowstep was grooming his pelt. Stormshade turned to the leaders.

Brackenstar cleared his throat, stepping in front of Goldenstar. "I suppose I can start."

Goldenstar's eyes flashed. "I suppose you can."

The warriors of the lake fell silent, shooting one another suspicious glances as Brackenstar began to speak.

"The prey is running well in ThunderClan," Brackenstar began. "As it always does. I am very happy to announce that Cinderdusk's kits have earned their warrior names. Please welcome Cherryfrost and Breezeheart!"

There were a few inaudible mews of congratulations from the throng of ThunderClan warriors, but the rest of the island was silent. Stormshade's pelt burnt uncomfortably. *Poor kits.*

Hostile glances were thrown from Clan to Clan, and the anxiety in the air began to press harder still against Stormshade's pelt. Brackenstar cleared his throat. "Thank you all for being so polite," he snarled sarcastically. "Additionally, we have also welcomed an outsider into our ranks. Brambleblaze of WindClan arrived some nights ago, alongside his former apprentice, Woolshine."

A chorus of gasps and whispers erupted from the crowd. Neither Goldenstar or Brackenstar gave them any mind, and the ThunderClan leader continued to speak.

"No doubt, these WindClanners will thrive in a more honest, noble Clan." Brackenstar dipped his head, stepping back.

Thornstar stepped forward, but hesitated, shooting a look towards Goldenstar. "Would you like to go?"

Goldenstar met his gaze. "No."

Thornstar's eyes flashed with surprise, but he simply nodded and took Brackenstar's place. "ShadowClan is as strong as ever," he announced uncomfortably. "A pair of twolegs tried to enter our camp, but we saw to it that they'll never bother the lake again." He dipped his head respectably, before withdrawing.

Sparrowstar didn't move. He angled his ears towards Goldenstar, but Goldenstar remained seated, eyes dark.

What is he doing? Stormshade wondered if he should climb up and speak for him.

The SkyClan leader blinked at Goldenstar, tail flicking nervously. "Shall–"

"Yes." Goldenstar's answer was curt and immediate. Sparrowstar wrinkled his nose, and turned to the crowd.

"SkyClan remains firm," he announced. "We continue to keep an eye on the ThunderClan border, and we are prepared to fight for our allies. That is all."

Stormshade felt dread worming in his belly. All eyes were on Goldenstar. *Say something!*

"Troutstar?" Sparrowstar was eyeing the RiverClan leader.

Troutstar growled, mistrust in his gaze. "No." He jabbed a paw towards Goldenstar. "Let him speak."

Goldenstar nodded without a word, and stood. His broad shoulders rippled with muscle as he stalked to the front of the Great Oak.

"I am sure," he began, "That some of you have noticed my small patrol here tonight." He gave Troutstar a look, and continued, "The reason for this is that WindClan is not well. A great sickness has consumed my Clan."

Stormshade felt as if a wave of water slammed into him, knocking the breath from his lungs. *What??*

"WindClan has lost many lives. Our medicine cat gave his life trying to treat the sickness." His gaze flashed towards Stormshade, heavy with emotion. "Mouseleap, who was still pregnant with my deputy's kits, died in her nest last quarter moon."

Stormshade felt as though his chest was on fire. *How* dare *he?!* He snarled under his breath.

"Stormshade..." Fallowstep dipped his head. "I'm so sorry."

Stormshade glared at the SkyClan deputy, heart pounding. *I can't believe it.* "I-I don't need your condolences," he snapped.

"We have no real reason for being here," Goldenstar admitted sadly, "Except for tradition's sake."

Brackenstar and Thornstar exchanged glances, as though they felt guilty for their hostility. Goldenstar hung his head. Stormshade saw the leader's eyes searching the clearing, stopping when they met Sunclaw's gaze. *It was* his *idea.*

"Then go home." Thornstar's voice was heavy with understanding. "Nobody will think less of you, Goldenstar."

Goldenstar dipped his head, ears flattening mournfully. "Thank you, my friend. Thank you." He hunched over, slithering awkwardly down the Great Oak, and signalled for his warriors to follow him.

Stormshade didn't put any thought into what he was doing. He simply followed, his blood pounding in his ears. Goldenstar immediately padded to Sunclaw's side, bending his head to speak with him as they crossed the tree-bridge. Stormshade lowered his head, unable to look at the other warriors. *Goldenstar made me out to be a liar,* he realized. *Using my mate's death for my own ends. And everyone will find out.*

As soon as they were out of earshot, Stormshade stormed up to his leader, thrusting Sunclaw out of the way. "What are you *doing*?" he hissed.

"I am doing what is best for WindClan," Goldenstar growled back.

"You're *lying*."

"Remember when you escaped from RiverClan?"

"Yes," Stormshade snapped. "The night before Beestream died."

"That next gathering, I lied through my teeth for your sake, Stormshade." Goldenstar's eyes were aflame with anger. "I told them

that our attack patrol was an envoy. I misquoted Troutstar in front of the entire lake. I twisted words and events until our names were cleared."

"That's *different*!" Stormshade insisted. "That was–"

"For your benefit." Goldenstar's lips curled back to reveal a snarl. "You were okay with that because it made you look good."

"You *lied* about my mate!" Stormshade's voice rose into a yowl. "That's insane!"

"It's all for the best, apprentice." Sunclaw squeezed between them, eyes gleaming. "Goldenstar and I have a plan. RiverClan will be gone tonight if we carry it through."

"*Gone*?"

Goldenstar nodded. "Clans always lie to appear stronger. We lied to appear weaker. They will never see us coming."

"*Gone*?" Stormshade repeated, tail lashing. "StarClan wouldn't want that!"

"StarClan killed your mates, Stormshade!" Sunclaw's rank breath billowed across the deputy's muzzle. "StarClan drove Cloudstar insane and turned your father into a sickly bag of bones!"

Stormshade snarled, unsheathing his claws. He lifted a paw to strike at his mentor, but Sunclaw didn't move.

"Do it," he hissed. "You don't have it in you."

Then

Rushstripe tried to ignore the wintertime chill as he trekked towards the RiverClan border, Sunclaw at his flank. The frigid air seemed so thin that he could hardly breathe.

"What did you need me to do again?" Sunclaw shook out a forepaw, attempting to warm up.

Rushstripe paused at the border, parting his jaws. *Is she out there?* "Just wait here for me," he murmured.

"Where are you going?"

Rushstripe hesitated, meeting his friend's eyes. "I don't know how to tell you," he admitted. "You'll know when I get back. In the meantime–" he touched his nose to Sunclaw's ear, "--keep a lookout."

Sunclaw dipped his head solemnly. "I promise," he mewed. "Nobody will even know we came out here tonight."

Rushstripe nodded in turn, his heart aching with trust for his friend. "I'll see you at sunrise, Sunclaw."

"Stay safe."

"I will," Rushstripe vowed. Reluctantly, he tore away from his Clanmate, the tom with whom he hunted, trained, and fought. *I would trust nobody else to keep me safe.*

Rushstripe took a breath. With one, slow step, he crossed into RiverClan territory. There was no turning back.

Now

"Our plan is simple." Goldenstar had assembled the warriors of WindClan in one great circle. Stormshade was sitting next to him, and he felt ashamed for it. "We will attack RiverClan in their nests."

A few cats shifted uncomfortably, as if worried about the morality of Goldenstar's plans.

Goldenstar took no notice. "The tunnelers will march into their nests and flush them out. The moor runners will use their speed and agility to chase them far, far away."

Shaleflame blinked. "Away?" he mewed. "Like... into exile?"

Winnowfall tilted her head. "Why?"

"WindClan isn't safe," Goldenstar explained. "RiverClan and ThunderClan would do the same to us if they had the chance, but ThunderClan is weak. Our allies surround them on all sides." His brow furrowed. "RiverClan, on the other paw, poses a great threat to us." He climbed to his paws, his fiery gaze sweeping across every warrior. "They have been laying traps on our border, my friends. They have killed two of our cats. They killed Tigerstorm." He paused, a genuinely pained look flashing in his eyes. "My best friend. And I will not rest until we are safe from their aggression."

Stormshade didn't say a word. *I'm a coward.* He watched his Clanmates exchange glances. Goldenstar paused for a moment, before jabbing a paw at Rushwind.

"Your kits are due to be apprentices next moon, yes?"

Rushwind nodded slowly, pressing against her mate, Thornface. "That's correct."

"Do you really feel comfortable, knowing that any inch of our territory could be rigged? Could result in another death? Are you okay with that, Thornface?"

Thornface shook his head. "Absolutely not."

Every hair on Stormshade's pelt screamed for him to speak up, but he couldn't. His muzzle twitched, unable to produce a mew. *They'll think I'm weak,* he reminded himself. *Goldenstar won't like me anymore. Sunclaw will laugh. I can't.*

"Leopardheart?" Goldenstar rounded on Galetrot's mate, confidence in his eyes. "Do you like the idea of your unborn kits roaming this territory, able to die at any moment?"

"No, Goldenstar!"

"Then it is settled!" Goldenstar straightened, chest puffed. "WindClan will only be safe if our enemies are gone!"

Stormshade suddenly felt the breath to speak. "Goldenstar–"

"RiverClan will be the first!" Goldenstar lifted his tail. "For

WindClan!"

Stormshade felt horror bubbling in his throat as Barkfur climbed to his paws. "For WindClan!"

Foxrunner flexed her claws. "For WindClan!"

Stormshade watched as the warriors, slowly but surely, began to join into the chant. "For WindClan!"

Goldenstar's teeth bared, glinting in the moonlight. "Glory," he yowled, "to our Clan!"

Then

Rushstripe knew that his life was about to change as he wormed his way deeper into foreign soil. The scent of fear was fresh on his tongue. *I hope she's okay.* His paws pricked uncomfortably as he padded through the pebble-strewn territory of RiverClan.

There was a sickly, empty feeling in his chest. He could hardly catch his breath. So much could go wrong. *Please let her be okay.*

The moon shone down on him overhead, lighting his path as he wove through the trees and reeds. The smell of fish wafted into his nose, and he saw a half-eaten carcass on the ground.

"Sorry for the mess." A calm voice drifted into his ears. "I was hungry."

Rushstripe whipped around. He felt as if he was melting slightly as he gazed into the other cat's eyes. *Lakefrost.* The grey tabby RiverClan she-cat looked slightly nervous, and very tired. "Are the kits okay?" he asked.

"They're... restless, but fine," she murmured. She stepped aside, revealing a soft, mossy nest. Three grey bundles wriggled in its centre, mewling. Rushstripe felt the chilly air suddenly become warm, and he tentatively padded forward to inspect his kits.

A big grey tabby tom-kit was first. Rushstripe extended a paw, and it latched on, shivering. Rushstripe choked. *They're perfect.*

The next was a skinnier tabby tom, who looked almost identical to the first kitten. He turned away, avoiding his father.

The last kitten was a pretty, sleek she-kit. Rushstripe was taken aback as she met his gaze with two, ocean-blue eyes.

"She opened her eyes yesterday," Lakefrost cooed, nosing her gently. Rushstripe pressed against her, admiring his family. "It's only a matter of time before she says her first word."

"They're perfect," he murmured, burying his muzzle in her neck. "Thank you."

"Thank you." Lakefrost leaned against him, purring deeply. "What shall we name them?"

Rushstripe thought for a moment. His gaze drifted over each perfect kit, settling at last on the big grey tom. He bent towards him, licking his soft grey pelt. "This one," he murmured, "is named..."

Now

"...Stormshade." Goldenstar's voice was a low murmur. He was at the head of a great WindClan patrol, his eyes dangerous slits. "You came here when you spoke to Troutstar. Where do we go?"

Stormshade strained to hear his leader over the bubbling stream, ears swiveling back and forth. *I recognize this place.* He had been here with Beestream during Goldenstar's first days as leader. She made me so comfortable. He parted his jaws. "Any guards?"

Claytail slithered to his side. "I don't smell any," he whispered. "I don't think they expected us to attack on a gathering night."

Stormshade nodded gravely. *Oh, StarClan, what am I doing?* He squinted, straining to catch a glimpse of RiverClan's camp. He saw the moon glinting off of flowing water, and stiffened. "There," he whispered.

"What is it?" Goldenstar craned his neck.

"Notice that the river forks," Stormshade hissed back. "There's a

little island between the streams. That's their camp."

"Easy enough." Goldenstar took a step forward, but Stormshade blocked his way.

"We'll make too much noise," he hissed. "They'll hear the splashes." he tossed his head upstream, tail flicking anxiously. "There are stepping stones that way."

Goldenstar paused, before a grin slowly spread across his face. "We're about to destroy RiverClan," he murmured, "right through their front entrance." He padded away, brushing past Stormshade. "Stormshade, you and I are about to make history."

Stormshade stared after him as his fellow warriors slunk through the marshes, following their leader's pawsteps. The tunnelers pushed ahead, muscles rippling beneath their short fur as they gathered before the stepping stones. Goldenstar paused, tasting the air for a moment, before closing his jaws. "No guards," he confirmed. He glanced at Stormshade, before shaking his head and turning to Sunclaw. "You can lead the first patrol," he growled. "All of the tunnelers."

Sunclaw dipped his head, raising his tail. Stormshade reluctantly fell in line behind the warrior, hot with embarrassment, but Goldenstar extended a paw, blocking his way.

"Except for you," he murmured. "You're with me."

Stormshade narrowed his eyes at his leader, suspicion flaring in his chest. *Okay.*

Sunclaw took a few steps forward, but stopped in his tracks, nose wrinkling. "Stormshade," he hissed, "There're no stepping stones here!"

"What?" Stormshade's fur spiked, and he trotted to Sunclaw's side. He felt his stomach drop as he gazed into smooth, flawless water.

No stones were in sight.

"What now?" Sunclaw's voice was sharp with anger.

Stormshade took a deep breath. "It's the moon," he murmured. "Brought the tide up." He turned to Goldenstar, heart pounding. "There's only one way across now."

Goldenstar knew what he meant. Clearing his throat, he gave only one order.

"WindClan, attack!"

A collective yowl rose from the WindClan warriors as they dove into the river. Stormshade was swept off of his paws as the mass of excited cats rushed the RiverClan camp.

He spluttered, taking in a mouthful of freezing water. The stones beneath him shifted and rolled with each precarious step, but he knew he had to keep going. *Maybe Goldenstar will change if I prove myself to him.*

Water splashed into his eyes as the moor runners made it to the other side of the river, outrunning their bulky tunneler Clanmates. Stormshade felt Swiftleap give him a nudge from behind.

"Hurry up!"

"I'm going!" Stormshade scrabbed to the shore, water streaming from his pelt as he raced into the RiverClan camp. *The dens,* he thought. *I have to clear the dens.*

Hardly a soul was stirring in the camp, and Stormshade noticed a few groggy RiverClanners climbing to their paws, ears twitching.

"Get them!" Foxrunner unsheathed her shining claws as she dove into the nearest den – a fallen, empty tree. "Go around, Stormshade!"

Stormshade nodded, sprinting to the other side of the tree. A chorus of surprised shrieks emerged from the den as Foxrunner chased three frightened RiverClan warriors to the other side. Their groggy eyes widened with horror when they saw Stormshade waiting for them. He unsheathed his claws, hissing as he struck out at their muzzles and chests.

Foxrunner cackled victoriously as she leapt onto a silver tom's back, digging her claws into his shoulders. Stormshade turned, clamping his jaws around a fleeing ginger she-cat's tail and dragging her backwards.

She turned, swinging clumsy paws at his ears, but the WindClan deputy dodged them easily. She's too tired to fight. Stormshade countered with a blow to her shoulder, sending her stumbling into the mud.

"Stormshade!" Goldenstar was battering a helpless brown tom with his forepaws. "Over here!"

"Coming!" Stormshade took off, tail streaming behind him, but a heavy force plowed into his side, bowling him over. "Ah!"

"It's time you learnt your place," a hoarse voice hissed. Stormshade blinked the pain from his eyes, leaping aside just in time to dodge a hefty strike from Timberclaw. The RiverClan deputy's green eyes glittered with pure hatred. "I will never forgive you."

Stormshade unsheathed his claws, hackles lifting. "Bring it on!"

Timberclaw bared his fangs. "You think you're better than me?" He aimed a blow for Stormshade's cheek. "No!"

Stormshade ducked, attempting to land a strike on the RiverClanner's shoulder. Timberclaw knocked his paw aside, raking his claws across Stormshade's chest. Stormshade gasped with pain, stumbling back to avoid another swipe. Timberclaw snarled, frothing at the mouth. "I will enjoy killing you," he hissed, "the same way you tried to kill me." With a roar, Timberclaw darted forward, slamming his paws down in one great arc. Stormshade stepped aside, piercing his pelt with his claws and flinging him forward. Timberclaw fell onto his stomach with a grunt, and Stormshade promptly leapt onto his back, digging his teeth into one of his shoulders. Warm blood splattered in his mouth as Timberclaw let out a pained yelp. With a heave, the big RiverClan tom rolled over, crushing Stormshade beneath his weight. In an instant, he was back on his paws. Stormshade attempted to follow suit, but the brown tom knocked him aside with a single paw.

Pain seared like lightning through Stormshade's face as he attempted to blink the blood from his eyes, but he was too slow. He felt Timberclaw's weight crashing down onto his shoulders, and the ground rushed up to meet him as he slammed into the mud. Timberclaw growled in his ear, and Stormshade felt claws piercing his flesh.

He winced as a clump of fur was torn away, swiftly followed by claws raking through his flanks. Stormshade yowled in pain, twisting desperately around to snap at Timberclaw's forepaw. He sank his teeth in hard, hearing the faint sound of bones crunching as Timberclaw screeched. Pain lit up his eyes as he crashed into the dirt. Stormshade reared, slamming his forepaws into Timberclaw's chest. Timberclaw gasped, the wind knocked from him, and curled around himself, struggling to catch his breath. He groaned in pain.

"Next time," Stormshade panted, "Just stay down." He whirled around, racing to Goldenstar's side.

The WindClan leader was chasing a white she-cat into the bushes, face glowing with excitement. He skidded to a halt, snapping at her forepaws, before turning to his deputy. Not a scratch marred his golden pelt.

"The medicine den!" His voice was eager and breathless. "It's right on the river!" He rushed ahead, and Stormshade raced after him.

"Wait!" he called. "You–"

"Come on!" Goldenstar called over his shoulder, effortlessly batting a black tom away with one paw.

Goldenstar ducked inside. Stormshade felt a spike of disgust as he realized what Goldenstar must've been planning, but he followed nonetheless.

The medicine den was dark and filled with the scent of fear. A cream coloured she-cat cowered in front of the herb stockpiles, shaking.

"P-please don't hurt me," she whimpered. "I can't fight."

Stormshade recognized her as Lightwish, the RiverClan medicine cat. Goldenstar snarled at her, eyes aflame with hatred. He raised a paw, teeth bared. *He's going to kill her!* Immediately, Stormshade darted between them, blocking him. He snarled at Lightwish.

"Get out of here," he hissed, "And we *won't kill you.*"

She seemed to realize what he was doing. She nodded. "Th-thank you," she stammered. She haphazardly scooped a pawful of herbs from the stockpile and hared away, racing towards a wounded warrior in the centre of camp.

"Stormshade!" Goldenstar's hiss pierced his ears. "We could've crippled RiverClan if you hadn't gotten in my way!"

Stormshade blinked. "Sorry," he lied. "I wasn't thinking about that."

Goldenstar gritted his teeth, frustration in his eyes. He peered through the den wall, which was a collection of tree roots, towards the river. "We're dumping the herbs," he snapped. "All of them." Without waiting for his deputy's approval, he plunged his paws into the stockpile, shoving them through the gaps in the roots. Stormshade felt his heart sink as he watched herb after herb tumble into the water, never to be seen again.

And then a yowl filled his ears. Timberclaw raced into the den, claws outstretched. "*Stormshade*!"

He whipped around to face his enemy, but Goldenstar was faster. He sank his teeth into Timberclaw's scruff, yanking him backwards and pinning him to the ground. He wrestled with the RiverClan deputy for a moment, before holding him outstretched, belly and throat exposed, for Stormshade to do what he wished.

"Kill him, Stormshade," Goldenstar grunted. "You can finish what you started."

"Get off of me!" Timberclaw spluttered, coughing. He could hardly breathe through Goldenstar's chokehold.

Stormshade bared his teeth, thrusting his muzzle towards Timberclaw's. "Why?"

"You must feel powerful," Timberclaw wheezed. "Were you powerful enough to save Beestream?" he spat. "I bet you weren't. I bet she was in pain."

Stormshade unsheathed his claws. "Shut up!" he snarled. "I could've killed you!"

"But you didn't." Timberclaw chuckled, straining against Goldenstar so that he could get a closer look at his WindClan adversary. "You *ran*."

Stormshade growled, chest heaving.

"Do it." Goldenstar tightened his grip, making Timberclaw choke. "Kill him!"

Stormshade felt red welling around his eyes. *Were you powerful enough to save Beestream?* Timberclaw's words swam through his mind. *I bet she was in pain.*

Timberclaw writhed, choking on his own blood. His voice became shrill, and his eyes gleamed with panic. Stormshade hesitated. *He's done.* His claws sheathed. *No longer a threat.*

Goldenstar growled. "Look at you," he hissed. In one, swift movement, he caught Timberclaw on the cheek, slamming his head roughly into the ground. Timberclaw let out a short, jerky gasp, before falling still. "You're soft, Stormshade."

Stormshade stepped away from the RiverClan deputy's corpse. Blood was beginning to pool around his skull. "He wasn't a threat."

"We're done here." Goldenstar turned, calmly exiting the den. "WindClan! We are finished!"

Stormshade could hardly hear him. He just stood in the den, unable to believe his own eyes. *Beware of the Lion.* The world began to spin around him. *Good intentions will lead the noblest among you into darkness.* The prophecies he had recieved so many moons ago were now just as clear as they were the moment he received them.

He shook his head. RiverClan stench was still fresh on his nose.

Living. He turned. A grey tabby she-cat was peering at him from through the roots. "Stormshade?"

Stormshade backed away significantly, eyes widening. "How do you know my name?"

She didn't answer him. "Are you going to hurt me?"

Stormshade caught her scent. She was a RiverClan warrior. "Why didn't you run?" He lowered his voice, bending to look into her eyes. "You need to leave. Goldenstar wants to kill all of you."

"Follow me." The warrior motioned across the river. "It's shallow."

Stormshade looked over his shoulder, towards Goldenstar and his Clanmates. Then, he looked back at the she-cat.

Looking into her blue eyes, he suddenly felt safe. He nodded, squeezing through the roots and wading into the water.

The grey tabby was limping. She had a horrible scratch running down one of her forepaws, bloodying up the water as she crossed. Stormshade was led into a dark, damp clearing. They ducked underneath a low-hanging willow branch. Stormshade caught sight of a light grey tabby she-cat, cleaning her wounds in the grass.

"Oceaneyes?" The tabby glanced back towards Stormshade. "I brought a friend."

Oceaneyes froze, looking up from her wounds. "*Stormshade*?" She wore an expression of hatred. "He's our enemy!"

"You've met." The tabby let out a weak purr, despite the wounds criss-crossing her pelt.

Stormshade glared at Oceaneyes, tail lashing. "Are you two here to kill me?" he growled.

"No." The tabby dipped her head. "I... promised Rushstripe I would tell you something." She stared at her paws. "We were going to introduce you together, but... he got sick."

Stormshade felt his nose twitch. *This isn't right.* He could hear screeches of victory behind him as WindClan took the RiverClan camp.

The tabby tore her gaze away from her paws, forcing herself to meet Stormshade's gaze. "I can tell you aren't happy with Goldenstar," she mewed. "This is your chance to start anew. You can join us. We can go somewhere safe."

Oceaneyes let out a low growl. "Lakefrost, why would we take this mange-pelt with us?"

"Look at his pelt," she mewed pointedly. "You have the same stripes."

Stormshade turned to peer at Oceaneyes, before looking down at his chest. *This isn't real.* He looked back up, into her eyes. It was like staring into a mirror.

"Oceaneyes..." Lakefrost's voice was thick with emotion. "Meet your brother."

Oceaneyes fell silent. She padded forward, gaze softening. Stormshade took a step forward as well, searching her expression. Was that anger in her eyes?

"I..." Oceaneyes' mew was hardly a whisper. She blinked furiously. Stormshade wasn't sure if she was blinking away the blood welling up on her forehead, or the tears welling up in her eyes. "...I looked everywhere for you."

Stormshade stared back at her, then at Lakefrost. "And I always wondered why I only had a father." His damp, freezing pelt suddenly heated, and part of the gap Mouseleap left behind was refilled. "I... I'm so sorry for allowing this to happen to your camp."

Lakefrost gazed at him, longing burning in her eyes. "We can be a family again," she whispered. "You can join us."

Stormshade paused. He caught a familiar scent. *Sunclaw*. "I–"

"Stormshade?" Oceaneyes was shaking.

Stormshade's heart ached with the desire to stay, but he knew what he had to do. "I...have made a horrible decision," he admitted. "I need to make it right." He stood, turning, before padding into the bushes. "I'm sorry."

* * *

Sunclaw was long gone by the time Stormshade left the clearing. His heart pounded with anticipation as he tasted the air. His trail snaked through the woods, beneath logs and roots, and towards WindClan territory.

Every step filled Stormshade's chest with even more worry than the last. Blood roared in his ears. *What have I done?* The marshland was beginning to melt away as the moor began to take over. Sunclaw's trail lead directly into a tunnel entrance.

It yawned before him, threatening grave danger for any lesser cat.

Stormshade was not a lesser cat. He was a tunneler of WindClan, and though fear pierced his heart, he began his descent.

The darkness engulfed him immediately. A few holes had been poked through the tunnel roof, allowing moonlight to peek in.

"I heard it," Sunclaw whispered in the darkness. "I heard everything."

Stormshade froze. His claws slowly unsheathed. "You knew, didn't you?" Paws scuffled somewhere deeper in the tunnel.

"WindClan is in a time of darkness, apprentice." Sunclaw's voice was dangerously low. "We cannot afford codebreakers." Pawsteps pierced the darkness, hooking Stormshade's pelt and throwing him to the ground. Stormshade saw a large sihlouette lunge at him in the gloom and rolled clear. He felt paws breeze past his cheek, slamming into the mud. Leaping to his paws, Stormshade attempted to retaliate, but Sunclaw was upon him in an instant, smashing him into the tunnel wall. Stormshade shoved him clear with a grunt, rearing onto his hind paws, and Sunclaw did the same.

They wrapped their forepaws around each other's shoulders,

grappling one another. Sunclaw snarled into his former apprentice's face, eyes glowing.

"I have nobody," he hissed. Stormshade grunted, muscles burning as he tried to push him back, but Sunclaw was just as strong as he was. Their hind paws sank into the mud as they struggled. "My father was killed by a RiverClan patrol." Stormshade felt one of Sunclaw's forepaws disappear from his shoulder, slamming into his chest. The deputy tumbled backwards, scrambling desparately to his paws so that he could doge the next blow. "My brother was killed avenging him," Sunclaw snarled. "My best friend chose one of those fox-hearts over me." He lunged again, but Stormshade was ready, raking his claws up Sunclaw's chin. The grey tom flinched away, clumsily slamming into a tunnel wall. Stormshade caught his breath as they circled one another. Sunclaw bared his teeth. "I'll be dead before I let them take anything else," he hissed. "If you love those fish-eating cowards so much, I'll make sure they join you."

Stormshade bared his teeth. "I'll deliver your body to their camp," he panted, "so they can send their regards."

"*Rah!*" Sunclaw launched himself at his Clanmate, eyes blazing. Stormshade ducked beneath him, throwing his shoulders upward to crush his opponent against the den ceiling. Sunclaw groaned, reaching down to claw at Stormshade's hindquarters. Pain seared through his pelt as Stormshade's hind legs buckled, sending him crashing back down. He struggled to his paws as Sunclaw raced back around, raking his claws across Stormshade's cheek. His muzzle jerked aside as he stumbled in the darkness, heart pounding. *I'll never defeat my mentor!*

Stormshade whirled around, flinging out a desperate paw. It sailed harmlessly through thick grey fur, and Sunclaw swiped his paws out from beneath him.

"So easy," he chuckled. He rained down blow after blow on Stormshade's ears, driving him backwards. Stormshade could hardly see through his own blood, but he knew that he couldn't lose.

With a surge of energy, he burst forward, throwing Sunclaw off balance, before roughly shoving him into the cave wall. Sunclaw

groaned with pain as Stormshade wrapped his forepaws around his head, driving it as hard as he could into the ground. A meaty *thwack!* followed as Sunclaw made contact with the tunnel floor, stunning him. Stormshade began to press forward, slashing at his mentor's face. Sunclaw growled with painful frustration, ears pinned back. "You'll never win!"

"Yes–" Stormshade boxed his ears, "--I–" he slashed his nose, "--will!" with one great heave, he threw Sunclaw to the ground, rough enough to knock the breath from his body.

Sunclaw grunted, trying to climb to his paws. Stormshade leapt onto his back, digging his claws into his shoulders. Sunclaw shifted beneath him, effort burning in every muscle, but Stormshade held firm.

He thrusted his jaws next to Sunclaw's ear. "Surrender."

"You're too scared to kill me," Sunclaw hissed. "When the sun rises tomorrow, WindClan will have a new deputy."

Stormshade dug his claws deeper. "You–"

"I have spent too long being overlooked," Sunclaw snarled. "Do you want to know something? *I* made that tunnel collapse. *I* put Goldenstar in danger, just so *I* could save him. The young fool fell for it. He trusts me because *I* saved his life." Sunclaw attempted to climb to his paws, but Stormshade forced him back down. "When you're dead, *I* will finally be deputy. Like I always should've been."

Stormshade hissed in his ear. "Nobody will remember you."

Sunclaw laughed, his voice fraught with pain. "When Goldenstar rules the lake, you'll be remembered as a villain. You keep interfering in what could make us powerful. You put in so much effort when you've already lost."

Stormshade stiffened. "What?"

"Goldenstar and I have a plan." Sunclaw's voice held a hint of condecension. "First thing tomorrow morning, we will march on ThunderClan. Goldenstar will prove that we aren't a bunch of

starving rabbit-chasers. We will have the respect we deserve, and you can do nothing to stop it."

Stormshade felt anger burning in his throat. He lifted a hind paw, scratching furiously at Sunclaw's stomach. The older tom yowled beneath him, writhing in pain. Stormshade then lifted the old warrior's head, slamming it again and again and again into the den floor until his face was a bloody pulp. Taking Sunclaw by the scruff, he threw him to the den wall, teeth baring.

"You can't save them." Sunclaw shuddered with pain. "I–"

Stormshade pulled on his chin, lifting his muzzle up to expose his throat. "Those wounds look nasty, Sunclaw."

"I trained you well." Sunclaw flexed his claws, attempting to fight through the pain. Stormshade bent closer to his mentor.

"I should leave you here," he hissed. "Leave you to suffer and die alone. That's what you deserve."

"Then do it," Sunclaw hissed. "Show me what kind of a warrior you really are."

Stormshade shook his head. "I won't enjoy a moment of my life as long as you're still sucking air." Swiftly, he lifted a paw, slicing through Sunclaw's throat in one clean swipe.

Blood splattered across his face as the senior warrior fell limp. Stormshade stepped away, admiring the body of the cat who had tormented him for so many moons.

I know what I must do. He turned to the tunnel entrance, allowing the moonlight to shine on his blood-soaked fur. *I must slay the Lion.*

X (Finale)

Now

Stormshade felt his heart sink. Blood was wet on his fur as he watched the moon climb downward.

First thing tomorrow morning, we will march on ThunderClan. The water of the lake rippled in the wind, and he took a deep breath. *I have so much to do, and so little time.*

The moors were silent. Stormshade couldn't remember a time when it had been more lifeless, and yet he knew that, very soon, the whole lake would be alive with battle.

He took a step forward, towards camp. This had to end.

The moon was inching ever closer towards the horizon. Stormshade sighed, trying to ignore his wounds, and began to walk.

Hailstorm. Stormshade flinched, heart aching. *He was a rogue.* He crested a hill, glancing towards ThunderClan's sprawling forest. *Nightbreeze was born there,* he remembered. *And Oceanbreeze took him as her mate.* His heart sank. *They're Codebreakers, all of them.* As long as Goldenstar was in power, they wouldn't be safe.

Stormshade winced. Pain spread through his cheek like fire, down his neck and shoulder. He stumbled, watching droplets of blood mottle the grass. *Goldenstar will kill me, and then he will kill my friends.* Gritting his teeth, Stormshade turned back towards the ThunderClan forest. *Firefur said Brambleblaze watches the moor. But would he really help me, after all we've fought over?* Blood dripped from his cheek, dropping audibly to the moor ground. *After I let him be exiled without uttering a word?* Guilt tugged at his stomach. *I need to try. I owe it to everyone else.*

Taking a deep breath, he began his journey, bowing his head as he went. How could he face the tom he allowed into exile? *When have I ever done anything for Brambleblaze?* His breath slowed. A surge of exhaustion overtook his body as he looked up at the moon once more. *I only have so much time.* Shaking his pelt, Stormshade grit his teeth and began to run. His muscles ached and his wounds burnt, but he knew that he didn't have much longer. *What if Brambleblaze isn't there?* The wind rushed through his fur like freezing water, dulling his pain and drying his eyes.

Rabbit dens tripped him, and thorns pierced his pads. *How do moor runners do it?* He raced through the grass, skirting tussocks and leaping over lonesome bushes. The sappy scent of ThunderClan was strong on his tongue.

He skidded to a halt, tasting the air. *Is he here?* The wind seemed to come to a sharp halt, as if wary of ThunderClan land. Heather-scent wafted into his nostrils from by the lake.

There, within two tail-lengths of the lakeshore, Brambleblaze sat. The broad-shouldered tom had rings beneath his eyes, and his ears drooped. Stormshade cleared his throat, but Brambleblaze didn't even flinch.

"I couldn't sleep," he murmured.

Stormshade shifted on his paws, taking a step forward. "I don't sleep well either," he breathed.

"If you're here to kill me," he sighed, "I wouldn't bother. I'm within two tail-lengths of the lakeshore."

He used to be so cheery. Stormshade dipped his head. "I'm not here to kill you," he informed the exiled warrior. "I'm here because I need your help."

Brambleblaze's chest twitched. He snorted, and that snort rose into a great laugh. "You're kidding!"

"I wish I was," Stormshade mewed. He inched towards his old enemy, his old denmate. "Brambleblaze, for all you did wrong, you

were always a good cat."

Brambleblaze scoffed bitterly, tail flicking. "*Hmph*."

"Brambleblaze." Stormshade held up a paw, showing him that his claws were sheathed. "Goldenstar has changed." *Good intentions will lead the noblest among you into darkness.* "And I think I know why. The whole lake is in danger – unless you and I stop him."

Brambleblaze tensed up, his muscles bunching. "What could *I* do?" His eyes flashed. "You all hate me."

"And you love us," Stormshade countered. He glanced at the moon. "At moonhigh, we destroyed RiverClan. At sunup, WindClan will attack the ThunderClan camp. You'll lose Dapplefur."

Brambleblaze seemed as though he was thinking. "Dapplefur.." he repeated.

"I haven't made the best decisions recently," Stormshade growled. "I stood by and remained silent while Goldenstar destroyed our Clan." He huffed, shaking his head. "Well, I won't be silent anymore. When I die, I want to die having made the lake a better place, even if that means working alone. Will you join me?"

Brambleblaze blinked back tears, eyes sparkling with love for WindClan. "I will," he whispered.

Stormshade nodded. "Good." He glanced back towards camp. "I'm going to confront him. If I fail, he won't trust anyone ever again. And I need you to–" he broke off, voice shaking. He sniffled, dabbing at his face. "Hailstorm. I need you to take him and make sure he's safe. And Mintfur... he's still out there somewhere. When you find them, I want you to get out of here. And don't look back."

Brambleblaze shuddered. "I'll try."

"*Thank you.*" Stormshade leaned against him, struggling not to sob. "Brambleblaze, you may have done wrong, but you always were a good cat." He gritted his teeth, forcing his voice not to waver. "You always were... *better* than me. And I am honoured to have trained with you."

"And I you," Brambleblaze murmured solemnly. Stormshade let out a sniffle as he rubbed his nose with a forepaw, hauling himself to his paws. Brambleblaze did so, too, turning back towards his camp.

Stormshade took a few steps forward, breathing heavily. *I may never see him again.* "Brambleblaze?"

He paused, peering over his shoulder. "Yes?"

"You're my brother."

Brambleblaze gave a curt nod of his head, eyes dimming. "Stay safe."

Neither tom said another word as they went their separate ways. Stormshade took a breath. The blood on his cheek had dried, though the ache was still present. He imagined that, somewhere behind the moonpool mountains, the sun was starting to rise. The grass passed slowly beneath him as light began to creep up the horizon. He picked up his pace, padding in time with the pounding of his heart. The clouds which had obscured the moon at the gathering that night had drifted by, illuminating his path. It made everything visible.

Especially Goldenstar's glossy yellow pelt.

It leapt out at Stormshade, as easily spotted as flame. He was alone, back to his deputy. Stormshade began to approach him, fur fluffing out.

Goldenstar's ears pricked. Stormshade heard him sniff at the air.

"I'm here," Stormshade mewed, voice firm.

"I caught your scent," Goldenstar's voice was as smooth as his fur. "You're here to kill me."

Stormshade looked away. The moon was crawling closer to the horizon. "I don't know what else I can do," he admitted.

"I am trying my best," Goldenstar sighed. He turned, meeting Stormshade's gaze. "Why?"

Stormshade blinked. *What can I tell him that he won't already know?* "I've been having dreams."

"*Good intentions shall lead the noblest among you into darkness,*" Goldenstar quoted. "I remember that."

"I had another," Stormshade replied, glaring up at his leader. "*Beware of the Lion.*" He let out a shaky breath, padding up the hill towards Goldenstar. "It terrified me, Goldenstar. I didn't understand – but I do now."

Goldenstar's tail flicked. "Your dream also told you WindClan would come to an end."

"..and that I'd rebuild it."

"Then killing me is pointless," Goldenstar reasoned. "You're risking your life chasing glory. I should've known you would."

"And you didn't?" Stormshade lowered his voice. "Cloudstar lost her vision in the battle with ThunderClan." He padded forward. "You did that, didn't you?"

"Cloudstar was unfit," Goldenstar replied. "She would've killed everyone."

"Maybe so." Stormshade recalled the battle with RiverClan. "But you didn't stop there."

The WindClan leader stood, his muscles rippling in the moonlight. "So the solution is to do exactly what *I* did?" He turned, flexing his claws. "To replace me, as I replaced Cloudstar?"

Stormshade felt a knot in his throat. "I believed in you!" His tail lashed. "You were supposed to save WindClan!"

"I still can!" Goldenstar snarled. "WindClan could rule everything *tomorrow* if only you stayed out of my way." His claws slowly unsheathed. "If it is our destiny to fight," he hissed, "then let us fight."

Stormshade took a pace back, unsheathing his claws. "I'm sorry."

Goldenstar bared his teeth. "I am not."

With a yowl, Stormshade darted for his leader, claws outstretched. Goldenstar was faster, sidestepping his attack and slamming his forepaws into his ribs. Stormshade grunted, stumbling, as Goldenstar took his tail in his jaws and swung him around, as easily as if he were an apprentice.

He was sent tumbling into the grass with a grunt. Agony tore through his body as his old wounds reopened. Rolling to his paws, he stumbled to the side just in time to dodge a second attack from Goldenstar. The WindClan leader hissed in annoyance, rearing up on his hind paws.

Stormshade dove for his stomach, but once again Goldenstar outsmarted him, dropping down on his shoulders and raking his claws down Stormshade's flanks. The deputy gasped with pain, twisting around to claw at his opponent's soft underbelly.

Goldenstar grunted, blood drawn, and rolled away, springing right back onto his paws. The leader circled his deputy for a heartbeat as the nighttime darkness began to subside. Stormshade took a breath. *The sun is rising.*

Goldenstar's eyes flashed with outrage. "Where is Sunclaw?" He hissed.

Stormshade struggled to his paws, flanks burning. "I killed him," he snarled. "And I enjoyed it."

"*Killed* him?" Goldenstar's lips drew back in a sneer. "It feels good, doesn't it?"

Stormshade stepped back, blood dripping from his sides. "I–"

"*Doesn't* it, Stormshade?" Goldenstar let out a roar as he made for Stormshade again, eyes blazing.

Stormshade caught him by the shoulders, throwing him to the ground, but Goldenstar adapted immediately, swiping his forepaws out from under him. Stormshade hit the dirt with a grunt, clumsily rolling free from another attack. He leapt to his paws, just in time

to be tackled.

Goldenstar pressed his muzzle into the dirt, snarling. "I tried to help you," he hissed, running claws down Stormshade's spine. "You could've ruled the forest on my death, but instead you will be nothing more than a forgotten deputy!"

Stormshade surged upwards, throwing Goldenstar off his paws. "I don't want your power!" He snapped, raking his claws through golden fur.

Goldenstar knocked his paws aside, spitting a curse. Briefly shaking his pelt, he made for Stormshade again, clamping down on his spine. Stormshade yowled in pain, rolling onto his back to crush his leader.

Goldenstar huffed beneath him, letting go. Stormshade attempted to pin him, but his experienced enemy was swift, wriggling free and kicking out with two hind paws.

Red hot pain surged through Stormshade, who staggered backwards. "*Agh*!"

Goldenstar turned on his paws, batting Stormshade away with one large paw. The grey warrior rolled through the grass, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

"I wish I could say I was sorry," Goldenstar hissed. "Perhaps Cloudstar was right about you."

Stormshade forced himself back to his paws. *Everything hurts.* Goldenstar let out a victorious gasp, and Stormshade saw the sun reflecting in his eyes.

Stormshade clenched his jaw, and rushed for his foe once more. A sharp jab of pain sent him off balance, and Goldenstar easily swept him aside once again, claws piercing his skin.

Stormshade tried one last time to climb to his paws. His muscles screamed for him to stop. The sun allowed Goldenstar to cast a long, large shadow.

"It's too late," he sneered. "I won."

Everything slowed as Goldenstar made his last attack. Stormshade remembered the first battle move Sunclaw had taught him.

He felt Goldenstar's teeth pierce his throat, and allowed his legs to buckle. He brought his whole weight down on top of the WindClan leader's head.

It was a risky move. *Either his jaws clamp,* Stormshade realized, *or he lets go.*

As the pair fell to the ground, the pain in his throat sharpened. He screeched in pain, tearing himself free and slamming a forepaw into Goldenstar's nose, just as Sunclaw had done all those seasons ago.

Stormshade lifted a paw, applying pressure to his burning throat. *Fox-dung!*

Goldenstar coughed, flanks shuddering. "I told you I had won." Relief lit his gaze, and blood dribbled from his nose.

Stormshade took in a gulp of air. He felt blood trailing down his chest, into the grass. "No," he hissed. "It was a tie." With that, he leapt for Goldenstar's neck.

Goldenstar struggled, hissing. Stormshade growled, feeling his jaws meet. He felt a light snap beneath them as Goldenstar shrieked, then fell limp.

Stormshade let go, allowing Goldenstar to fall to his paws. Pain throbbed in his throat. *I need to end this,* he thought. *Before I die.* Unsheathing his claws, he began to tear at Goldenstar's stomach, throat, and chest. *Just like Tigerstar in the nursery stories.* He couldn't let the WindClan leader return.

He sliced and clawed until his throat became too painful to ignore. The sun gleamed harshly overhead, and Stormshade's heart leapt into his torn throat. *The battle!*

Turning from Goldenstar's corpse, Stormshade hared into the forest. His wounds stung as he ran, and his throat continued to throb, but

he knew he had no choice. *Everything depends on me*. Stormshade thundered across the moor, the grass rushing by underneath him. He felt like a moor runner, and exhilaration spread through his pelt, overcoming the pain.

Just a little further! He caught the scent of WindClan as he approached the ThunderClan border, jumping the stream that separated the two Clans.

Stormshade ducked into the forest. A great, ancient oak loomed overhead as Stormshade raced towards the ThunderClan camp. His blood continued to pour, and Stormshade felt as though he was prepared to collapse at any moment. His legs felt numb.

The sounds of battle crept into his ears as he rushed through the forest, scaring prey and frightening birds.

The bramble entrance of ThunderClan camp was visible ahead, among the bushes. He could hear yowls of pain and screeches of anger.

"Stop!" Stormshade winced as the brambles dug into his pelt. Fur spiking, the WindClan deputy burst into ThunderClan's camp. The scent of blood was on his tongue, and it wasn't just his.

Brackenstar was in the centre of the clearing, rallying his cats as the WindClan warriors fell upon him.

"Stop!" Stormshade leapt over Swiftleap, who was wrestling with a big brown tom.

"What are you doing?" Shaleflame skidded to a halt alongside him, but Stormshade ignored the younger warrior, scrabbling to the top of the highledge. "Everyone, stop!"

The fighting didn't cease. Panic wormed into Stormshade's throat. *What if SkyClan and ShadowClan are on their way?* "As your leader, I order everyone to stop!"

The WindClan warriors froze. Rabbitspark scurried backwards, breaking apart from where he was wrestling with Firefur. Cinderdusk looked up from where she was pinning Foxrunner.

"Leader?" Brackenstar repeated, tail flicking.

"Goldenstar is dead," Stormshade called back breathlessly. It felt strange, standing on top of the highledge.

The ThunderClan leader furrowed his brow as he caught sight of Stormshade's wounds. The eyes of two Clans were on Stormshade. "*You* killed him."

"I did what I had to," Stormshade replied. "To keep things peaceful." Raising his voice, he continued, "Last night, Brackenstar, Goldenstar led us to attack RiverClan. We destroyed them. I watched as Goldenstar murdered Timberclaw in cold blood. I watched him try to kill a defenseless medicine cat."

Brackenstar growled. The WindClan warriors eyed him distrustfully.

"Why should we follow you?" Claytail's eyes were narrow.

"Goldenstar promised us peace," Stormshade mewed steadily. "He promised us everything. But was anything all that different from when Cloudstar was in charge?" He felt a tinge of victory as his Clanmates exchanged thoughtful looks. "To give us the peace we desired, he brought us to war. A small piece of him died when Tigerstorm passed, and whatever was left was gone forever after the... accident." *ThunderClan doesn't need to know about the tunnels.*

Brackenstar growled, padding towards him. "What will make you any different from Goldenstar or Cloudstar?"

"I don't know that I will be," Stormshade conceded, glancing at his paws. "I can only say that we wanted peace, and we got war. We do not need to rule the lake for our Clan to know peace."

"You didn't say a word until Goldenstar was alone," Brackenstar snarled.

"I was a coward." Stormshade flinched at his own words, aware of the dozens of cats listening. "I cared too much about seeming brave and loyal to speak the truth." He stood, casting his gaze down on every cat. "My father would've been horrified. He told me to be the subject of my own legend, as Firestar was." He hung his head. "I *am*

the subject of my own legend, Brackenstar, and I am the villain." He allowed silence to befall the camp for a moment, before looking back up. "WindClan surrenders, Brackenstar. Let us go home, and we shall be friends."

There was a gasp of surprise from the gathered cats. Brackenstar's eyes glinted suspiciously. "You may leave in peace," he snarled, "But we will never be friends."

Stormshade touched his nose to the ground. "*Thank* you." He hobbled down from the highledge, noticing that the blood on his throat had dried.

"You can't go!" A tortoiseshell she-cat raced out from the medicine den, eyes wide. "Let me at least treat your wounds."

* * *

Stormshade grunted in pain as he hobbled towards the moonpool. Specklefur, the ShadowClan medicine cat, pressed against him reassuringly. "Don't strain yourself," she mewed. "Your ribs still need to heal."

Stormshade nodded, trying to blink the pain from his eyes. He felt a heavy weight pulling on his eyelids, and wanted nothing more than to sleep.

Soon. They began to circle a deep hollow. At the bottom was the most beautiful pond Stormshade had ever seen.

"I heard that this thing used to be a stone," Stormshade murmured.

"That's what the legend is," Specklefur sighed. "It was at the old forest. They used to take every apprentice to visit StarClan back then. Right before they became warriors."

Stormshade stared into the water, awestruck. *Every apprentice?* He wondered why they would've ever stopped. He could almost see stars skipping across its flawless surface.

They started down a beaten track, worn down from seasons upon seasons of pawsteps.

"Have you heard of the Tribe of Rushing Water?" Specklefur's question was passionate, as if she took great interest in the moonpool.

"Do they really exist?" Stormshade extended a paw to touch the water's surface. It was comfortingly cool.

"They do," Specklefur purred, amused. "They have been around for longer than the Clans." Pausing mischievously, she added, "Some say that the Clan founders were originally from the Tribe."

Stormshade suppressed a chuckle. *That's ridiculous.* "Interesting."

"The Tribe's ancestors lived around this lake." Specklefur grunted, easing Stormshade to the ground. "To them, the moonpool was a holy place, as it is to us. Take the time to look around you."

Stormshade nodded, surveying the pool. He couldn't tear his gaze away. "It's... incredible."

"The greatest cats in all of our history sat where you sit, Stormshade." Specklefur's voice was soft. "Every kithood tale, every hero you admired, was once here." Soft paws brushed the back of Stormshade's head, and Specklefur gently pushed him towards the pond. "Touch your nose to the water," she breathed, "And sleep."

Stormshade felt hesitance worm in his belly as he inched closer. *Is it true that the Dark Forest is on the other side?* He had heard the legend of Rootspring and Bristlefrost. And then, the cool, soft water touched his nose, and he wanted nothing more than to stay right there. *Bless StarClan.*

He suddenly felt even more exhausted than before, and though his eyes were closed, stars descended at the edge of his vision.

He felt the water on his muzzle vanish, and cool, warm air blowing on his pelt.

Blinking open his eyes, Stormshade saw himself once again under the shade of the giant, four-trunked tree.

A ring of cats surrounded him, their eyes just as bright as the stars

in their pelt. A big grey tom padded forward, young and strong.

"Welcome, son." He dipped his head respectfully. His voice was clear, and his breath betrayed not a single wheeze.

"Dad!" Stormshade totted forward, erupting into a purr. "You're here!" He rubbed his face into Rushstripe's chest, feeling weak. "I– I thought I'd never–"

"I am so proud," Rushstripe purred back. He nuzzled Stormshade's forehead. "You've done things no cat should ever have to do."

"I got to see you again," Stormshade replied shakily, his mew muffled. "T-that's what matters."

Rushstripe sighed happily. He shifted against his son, until his nose was pressed against his forehead. Stormshade felt warm all over.

"It is time," he murmured. "I knew you could do it. With this life, I give you a father's love."

A pulse of raw emotion thundered from Rushstripe's muzzle, directly into Stormshade's head. He gasped, attempting to flinch away, but found that every one of his muscles was stuck in its place.

"Let it make you a mentor to your kits, and a brother to your enemies." Rushstripe gave Stormshade an affectionate lick, before dipping his head and withdrawing.

Stepping in his place was a big, brown tabby tom, young and strong. Stormshade recognized him.

"Tigerstorm!" His tail twitched upwards. "We've all missed you!"

"And I missed you," Tigerstorm replied. He dipped his head, touching his muzzle to Stormshade's. "With this life, I give you loyalty. Never falter in your cause, but be the first to march forward."

This life was less fierce. Stormshade felt a sense of certainty prickle through his pelt. In an instant, he knew where to stand at all times.

What to fight for, when to speak up, and when to give himself for the greater good. He was at peace. *I am part of something greater than myself.*

Tigerstorm stepped away, eyes shining. "It was an honour to fight alongside you."

Before Stormshade could reply, a lithe brown tom was in his place. Stormshade didn't recognize him.

"I am Onestar," he mewed.

Stormshade stiffened. "*The* Onestar?"

The small brown tabby dipped his head.

"You knew Firestar!" Stormshade's fur bushed. "Are the stories true?"

"Mostly." Onestar exchanged an amused look with a grey tom at his flank. "With this life, I give you humility."

Stormshade felt his cold nose brush his forehead, and in an instant his forelegs buckled beneath him. Stormshade felt his muzzle press against the ground as he bowed before the older leader. Peace rushed through every inch of his pelt. In his mind, he could see a line of forgotten leaders and conquerors, from Windstar to Goldenstar. *They were all leaders,* he realized, *but nobody remembers them.*

Onestar purred. "Know when to be wrong, even when you are right."

Stormshade nodded weakly, watching helplessly as Onestar stepped aside to allow a fresh cat to take his place. It was The Ancestor.

Stormshade no longer felt anger, only relief. *At least it isn't Cloudstar.* "You came back," he murmured.

The Ancestor's eyes glinted playfully. "And I can finally talk to you like a normal cat!" He dipped his head. "I'm Gorsestar."

Stormshade felt his fur involuntarily fluff. "Windstar's mate?"

Gorsestar shrugged. "I suppose that's my legacy, eh?" He pressed his nose against Stormshade's. "With this life, I give you wisdom. Use it to decipher my crazed prophecies."

Stormshade rocked on his paws, though they remained frozen to the spot. He felt a deep sense of what was right, what to do next, and what to say. *This is incredible!*

Gorsestar pulled away, giving room for a pretty yellow she-cat. Stormshade felt his heart melt when he saw her.

"Beestream! Your wounds healed!"

"Of course they did, you daft furball!" Beestream's eyes glowed, and she pressed her muzzle into his chest. "With this life, I give you youth. You have so much ahead of you, my love."

Stormshade felt a sense of wakefulness wash over him. His pelt tingled with excitement, and suddenly he felt the desire to race through the moor, chasing rabbits and throwing snowballs at his Clanmates. He chuckled, purring. "I love you," he murmured.

Beestream rubbed her muzzle against his jaw. "I've waited for so long to hear you say that," she murmured.

"I'm sorry."

Beestream dipped her head. "Don't be." She stepped away, nodding to another she-cat at her flank. Stormshade glanced at her brown pelt, feeling as if everything he had lost was suddenly back in his paws.

"Mouseleap?"

"I'm here." Three kittens weaved around her forepaws as she stepped towards him, purring. "They're beautiful," she murmured.

Stormshade looked at the kits. *They look just like us.* "I can't believe it." A single teardrop trailed down his cheek.

"With this life," Mouseleap murmured, licking his cheek, "I give you acceptance. When one path grows over, another is opened."

Stormshade felt all of his grief wash away, to be replaced by a strong, immovable sense of peace. *When something happens,* he realized, *there is no going back. I can only make the best of it.* Determination washed over his pelt. "I understand."

"I'm glad." A familiar voice drifted into Stormshade's ears. He watched a brilliant, handsome golden-pelted tom pad in front of him. "I don't think I can begin to apologize."

"Goldenstar." Stormshade didn't know if he should've felt fear to see his enemy so young and strong. "You're here."

"I know you don't want to see me," he mewed. "Leadership is a horrible thing. What happened to Cloudstar happened to me." He gave Tigerstorm an affectionate glance. "Those who were close to me were suddenly so far away."

"I-it wasn't your fault," Stormshade stammered. "The prophecy made it happen."

"Oh, Stormshade..." Goldenstar dipped his head. "Remember what I said after Tigerstorm died. Everything was my fault." Touching his muzzle to Stormshade's head, he murmured, "With this life, I give you hindsight. Pick up the pieces of the past, and turn an ember into a flame."

Stormshade felt immense guilt wash over him. He could feel Beestream in his grasp once more, begging him to tell her he loved her. He could see Tigerstorm's corpse strewn across the riverside pebbles. *I could've done better,* he realized. *I need to change my ways, to improve in the future.*

Goldenstar lingered a moment longer. "I am sorry."

Stormshade couldn't bring himself to reply. He only nodded. *Acceptance. When one path grows over, another is born anew.*

A heartbeat passed, and suddenly a new cat was before him. Stormshade couldn't believe his eyes.

"Troutstar?"

"I was killed last night," Troutstar informed him, "By Goldenstar." The once-elderly RiverClan leader looked like a young tom, fresh from his warrior ceremony. He touched his nose to Stormshade's muzzle. "With this life, I give you justice. If you do not do the right thing, who will?"

Stormshade felt a wave of conviction wash over him. He felt strong love for his Clan, and all the lake. *Tough love. Sometimes you must do something hard so it'll be easy later.*

Stormshade watched Troutstar go, admiration in his chest. *I wish we could've been allies.* In his place was a black-and-white she-cat, eyes glimmering mockingly. "Hello, Stormshade."

Cloudstar! Stormshade forced his fur to remain flat. "Greetings."

A smirk spread across the former WindClan leader as she touched her nose to his ear. "With this life," she whispered, "I give you a mother's love. Nothing is too much for your family."

This life was the strongest one yet. Stormshade felt pain searing through his bones, and he grit his teeth. "*Rrrrrg*!" He could feel claws piercing his pelt, and heard the sounds of battle all around him. More than anything, he felt the desire to kill anything that got between him and his kits. *Is this what Cloudstar felt?*

Cloudstar withdrew, mischief glinting in her eyes, as Onestar, Gorsestar, Troutstar, and Goldenstar formed a ragged half-circle in front of him.

"It was an honour," Onestar mewed.

"You're one of us now." Goldenstar's eyes shone with pride. He glanced at Cloudstar.

She didn't say anything immediately. Instead, she padded forward, putting her muzzle next to Stormshade's ear.

"Look at them," she whispered, guiding his head in the direction of Mouseleap and Beestream. "*I* was the one who brought them here."

Horror spread through Stormshade's pelt as Cloudstar stepped

away. *No.* He wanted to unsheathe his claws, but all four of his paws remained rooted to the ground. *There's nothing I can do!*

Goldenstar dipped his head. "Go in peace, Stormstar."

Stormstar blinked, and suddenly everything was gone. The trees had disappeared, in favour of a stony hollow. Cool water lapped at his nose.

"Welcome back," Specklefur chirped. "You took longer than Thornstar did!"

Stormstar shook out his burning pelt, pulling away from the water. He could remember Beestream's death, as clearly as the day it happened. He remembered the words she hissed as she lay dying in his paws. *She's here.* "D-did I?"

"Chin up, Stormstar." Specklefur waved her tail. "You look younger! And I bet those wounds of yours will heal much faster now that you're fueled by the stars themselves!"

Stormstar struggled to keep his shoulders from sagging. *I don't feel younger.* He couldn't quite comprehend what had just happened.

"I imagined I would feel relief," he murmured. "Like when Cloudstar died." There was no hope, not anymore.

Despite the fact that Goldenstar's cruel reign was over.

Trivia

Goldenstar was originally intended to have lived a few generations before Stormshade's birth, as the main character of his own story called *Goldenstar's Rain.* In the book, he lead WindClan against an evil version of the Tribe of Rushing Water. It was my second ever Warriors Fanfiction.

In *Goldenstar's Rain*, Beestream was originally Goldenstar's deceased mate.

Dark Clouds takes a lot of influence from a roleplay I had with a friend of mine, Forestfire. In the roleplay, Stormshade became mates with Mouseleap, but had to deal with her abusive mother tormenting him in his dreams. He also came to blows with Jay, who is an upcoming villain. Goldenstar served as Stormshade's predecessor in this roleplay, the first time the two cats were ever alive at the same time.

Hailpaw was originally discovered by Mouseleap and Stormshade, but I instead choose Beestream and Stormshade instead because it fit their relationship better.

In the original arc, Stormshade's third mate was Willowpool, a RiverClan she-cat. In the rewrite, Oceaneyes was my first choice to serve as his mate, because I wanted to give Oceaneyes a bigger role. I still planned for Oceaneyes to be his mate up until partway

through Chapter II.

Dark Clouds originally was meant to focus almost entirely on Mouseleap and Stormshade's relationship, with Cloudstar as the main villain. However, the plot was pretty much nonexistent and the book was aimless, so I rewrote it into its current form.

Rushstripe originally brought Goldentooth, rather than Sunclaw, to Stormkit's birth.

The book cover was made by a friend of mine, azalea_db!

Stormshade as a character was originally a ThunderClan warrior, in my first story *Stormstar's Victory*. I switched to WindClan for his next story because I felt like it was an underrated Clan, and I wanted to be unique.